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"RESPECT THIS PLEDGE!" AS SHE SPOKE ISABEL VARONA HELD ALOFT THE GOLD BADGE GIVEN HER BY THE CHIEF.

OR, THE HUNTED LIFE.

A Romance of Two Generations.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR,
(5th U. S. Cavalry.)

AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL, THE BUCK-
SKIN KING," "WILD BILL'S TRUMP
CARD," "THE PHANTOM MA-
ZEPPA," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FOR ANOTHER'S LIFE.

SOFTLY swung a hammock to and fro, be-
neath the shade of an orange tree, and a
peon slave, fan in hand, was nodding as she
mechanically waved the palm-leaf over the
occupant who had been lulled to sleep by the
gentle motion.

It was in the garden of a handsome
hacienda that the hammock was swung, and
the afternoon sun had beaten down relent-
lessly and invited to repose beneath cooling
shades.

Enjoying a *siesta* in the hammock was a young girl, whose dark face tinted with the rich glow of health, and her ebon hair indicated her Mexican blood.

She was attired in a loose flowing robe of some gauzy material, and the lashes, as her eyes were closed in sleep, rested upon her cheeks, so long they were.

Her face was very beautiful, every feature being perfect, and her form was exquisitely molded, one tiny foot being seen beneath the dress, revealing a handsome slipper with gold buckle studded with precious stones.

Suddenly the rapid clatter of hoofs was heard without the garden wall, and they awoke the peon first with a start which also aroused her mistress.

"What is it, *Ilrah*?" asked the Mexican maiden half-rising from the hammock.

"A horseman has just ridden up, *senorita*," replied the peon.

"My father has returned then."

"No, *senorita*, it was not your father, the *senor*, for he came like the wind through the chaparral. Oh! there he comes now, *senorita*, and it is *Tonio*."

As the peon spoke a man hastily entered the garden.

He was dressed as a Mexican *vaquero*, and walked rapidly toward the maiden, his spurs and trappings musically jingling as he advanced.

His manner was that of one who had something of importance to communicate.

In the Mexican the maiden recognized the head herder of her father's ranch, and she called out quickly:

"Ho, *Tonio*, what brings you here with such speed, for your horse seemed to fly as he passed around the garden wall?"

"Oh, *senorita*, your father is a prisoner."

"My father a prisoner?" gasped the maiden.

"Yes, *senorita*, he was captured by the Americans last night."

"Mary Mother have mercy upon him! But, *Tonio*, my father is not a soldier, he is not in arms against these invading Americans, but simply a Mexican *ranchero*. Why then should they make him a prisoner?" and the face of *Senorita Isabel Varona* was now pale with alarm.

"Alas! *senorita*, they accuse him of being a spy!"

A cry broke from the maiden at this, and she said, with fierce vehemence:

"My father a spy?"

"How dare they so accuse him?"

"I know not, *senorita*; but he entered the lines of the Americans, was captured, and it is said that he was a spy. He asked that word be sent to the General Santa Ana, and the messenger told me what had happened, and I came to you, *senorita*, for the Mexican general can do nothing to save him."

"To save him?"

"Dare they harm my father, *Tonio*?"

"Yes, *senorita*, he will be shot as a spy at sunrise, unless he can be proven innocent."

"God have mercy!" and *Isabel Varona* seemed about to swoon; but, mastering her emotion, she suddenly cried:

"*Ilrah*, quick! Get my riding-robe, and you, good *Tonio*, have my fleetest horse saddled at once for me, while you take a fresh animal to accompany me."

"I will be ready within a few minutes."

So saying, *Isabel Varona* ran toward the hacienda with the speed of a deer, followed by the peon girl, and in half an hour's time she was attired in her riding-suit, and mounted upon a black mustang of great beauty, was flying along the road toward the American army, followed by the faithful *Tonio*.

The splendid black mustang was not spared but was forced to his full speed, and so rapid was his flight, so steadily was it kept up, that before half a dozen miles had been passed over, the Mexican, *Tonio*, had been left far behind.

Tonio was also well mounted, but the Blackbird, as the *Senorita Isabel* had named her horse, was a wonderful animal for speed and endurance.

It was thirty long miles from the *Varona Hacienda* to the American camp, and the trail led through valley, canyon, and over hill and plain.

But the noble horse was pushed to his utmost, and when he began to flag, the keen quirt fell mercilessly upon him.

Angry, and hurt by the blows, Blackbird sprang on with greater speed, and though

his beautiful rider could see that it was a terrible strain upon him, she yet showed no mercy, for the life of her father was at stake, and all depended upon her getting to the American camp in time to save him.

With a sinking heart she watched the shadows lengthening, as the sun neared the western horizon, and almost savagely she laid the whip upon the flanks of the straining mustang.

Slower and slower his pace became, and at last he did not flinch at the cruel blows.

A hill, crowned with a heavy growth of timber was upon her, and up this she urged the tottering horse.

She was yet two leagues away and Blackbird was broken down.

He could go but little further, and staggered, rather than ran.

At last, as he was near the hill-top the red stream of life burst from his panting nostrils and he fell heavily to the ground.

Isabel Varona saw that he must fall, and she nimbly caught on her feet.

"I will run on until I too fall by the road," she cried, firmly.

Then, as she was gathering her skirt around her she beheld a dozen forms spring from the roadside, and a voice cried in a commanding way:

"Hold, *senorita*!"

"You are my prisoner."

CHAPTER II.

THE MEXICAN BANDIT.

THE man who addressed to the *Senorita Isabel Varona* the startling words, that she was his prisoner, advanced rapidly to her side as he spoke.

With a cry of alarm she shrunk back from him and said:

"Ah, *senor*! who are you, and why do you detain me?"

"I am *Don Cantrella*, *senora*, the bandit chief," was the reply.

She gazed upon the man with a look of commingled horror and amazement.

She saw before her a handsome young man, for he was scarcely over twenty-five, and one dressed as a Mexican cavalier.

She knew the man *Don Cantrella* as an inhuman monster, from all that was said of him, and she could not believe that this handsome young *caballero* could be the famous bandit chief.

His men were dark-faced, cruel-visaged Mexicans, all armed to the teeth and wearing the same attire of herders.

For a moment *Isabel* could make no response, and then, as the thought of her father flashed before her mind, she cried:

"Ah, *senor*, I beg you not to detain me, for the life of another hangs upon my reaching the American camp before sunset."

"But you are the *Senorita Isabel Varona*?"

"I am."

"As wealthy as you are beautiful?"

"I am rich, yes, and I will pay you well to let me go."

"Your father will be willing to pay a handsome ransom for you."

"Name your sum, *senor*, and I will pledge it to you."

"You have not a sum with you that would serve as your ransom?"

"Indeed, no; I have only a few pieces of gold in my purse."

"And the *Senorita Isabel Varona* expects me to free her on my pledge to pay her."

"I have nothing else to offer."

"Then you must remain my prisoner until I send a messenger to your father, for your ransom money, which will be just five thousand *pesos*."

"Send. My father is a prisoner in the American lines, held there as a spy, and he is to be shot at sunset, unless I can get there in time to prove his innocence."

"See, yonder lies my horse, which I rode until he dropped dead, and now you detain me."

"For the sake of the Virgin, *senor*, I pray you let me go on my way, and I will kneel nightly in prayer to ask Heaven's blessings upon you, bandit though you are."

"Ay, I will pledge you the sum you ask, and will send you the money when and where you please."

The young outlaw chief gazed upon the beautiful girl with feelings of admiration and respect. Then he said in his low, musical voice, which was soft as the tones

of a flute when he willed it so, and yet could ring like a bugle in anger:

"*Senorita*, I believe what you say, and I accept your pledge. Meet me at Mustang Spring, two nights from this at sunset, with the money. Come alone, for I will accept it from no other hands, and as I now trust you, so can you then trust me."

"God bless you, *senor*!" and the voice of the maiden quivered.

"Pedro, bring my horse here, and place that lady's saddle and bridle upon him."

The man addressed quickly obeyed, and the young bandit continued:

"*Senorita*, allow me to offer you my horse, and beg you to accept him as a present from *Don Cantrella*, the guerrilla chief. He is fleet as the wind, and as enduring. Pardon me."

So saying he raised her lightly to the saddle, doffed his sombrero, and too happy to speak, *Isabel Varona* could only wave her hand in gratitude, as she went flying down the hill toward the American camp.

"How strange that I, who am utterly merciless, men say, should have allowed that woman to go," mused the young outlaw, as he stood watching *Isabel Varona* go flying down the trail with the speed of a frightened deer, holding the splendid blood bay steed, given her by the bandit, well in hand, and yet urging him to his full speed.

"I saw her once before only," continued *Don Cantrella*, musing in the same tone while his men had withdrawn to the timber, leaving him standing alone in the trail, a few paces from the dead mustang.

"I saw her at church, and she knelt near me, murmuring her prayers all unconscious of my admiration of her."

"They say that she is an only child, and the idol of her father."

"I have heard that her mother was dead, and that she was mistress of her father's grand hacienda, and the heiress of his vast estates."

"I have heard too that she was to marry her cousin, Captain *Pierre Roscaro*, of the Mexican *Lanceros*. 'Heaven have mercy upon her if she does, for, if he has not a black heart no man has.'

"Well, I was merciful and allowed her to go upon her promise to meet me two nights from this at the Mustang Spring. Will she keep her word? We shall see. If she does, well! If she does not, I will be merciless, for my faith in woman will have been destroyed, as it has been in men."

"Curses on all men, I say, after what I have been made to suffer."

"Ah me! how different might have been life to me, had not cruel wrong driven me to become what I am!"

His face was hard now, and his eyes fairly blazed with the hatred that welled up in them at the remembrance of what he had been made to suffer by his fellow-men.

CHAPTER III.

THE SPY'S FATE.

A YEAR prior to the desperate ride, taken by *Isabel Varona*, to endeavor to save her father's life, the American army in Mexico was encamped but a few miles distant from the forces under the Mexican general, *Santa Ana*.

In the army under the Stars and Stripes, there was no better soldier than *Harry Kenton*, who, for some reason, had gained from his companions the name of *Hark Kenton*.

He was a handsome, dashing young fellow, from Kentucky, who had run away from home, when his father had married a second wife, with whom he could not agree, and had been sailor and herdsman at different times, until the United States forces invaded Mexico, when he had joined a regiment, and turned soldier.

He had been living in Texas, and had often been across the Rio Grande, where he had learned to speak Spanish perfectly.

A splendid rider, a dead-shot, brave as a lion, ever ready to do a generous act, and with a voice which in song around the camp-fire at night, would draw tears from the hardest heart, "*Hark*" *Kenton* had become a general favorite with officers as well as comrades.

In one of the fights with the Mexicans, he would have been killed but for the courage of a comrade. His horse had been shot and fell upon him, pinioning his leg beneath him,

and down upon him rode two Mexican lanceros, their lances in rest. There seemed no hope for Kenton, and, unarmed, for he had fired his last shot, he gave up all hope, when suddenly a comrade came dashing toward him, directly upon the two lanceros. The Mexicans heard the rescuer's loud cry of defiance, turned, when almost upon the helpless soldier, and fled.

From that day Hark Kenton seemed to become the very shadow of Moss Reeves, for such was the name of his rescuer, and the two were inseparable.

One night an American soldier approached the picket and was halted. He was enveloped in a cloak, and in answer said that he had been sent out to reconnoiter, and, expecting to return before dark, had not the countersign.

So he was allowed to enter the lines by the sentinel, who knew him, for he had said he was Hark Kenton.

That night, by a secret trail, a body of Mexicans dashed upon the camp, surprising it, and getting away in safety after doing much damage.

One of the officers was wounded and left behind, and he stated that a spy in the American camp had informed them just how and when to approach.

"And who was this spy, señor?" asked the American commander.

"As I hate a spy, I will tell you—his name was *Hark Kenton*," replied the Mexican officer.

So it came out that Hark Kenton had come in by the sentinel, and that he had not been sent out by the officer in command.

Then it was known that he spoke Spanish well, had lived in Mexico, and he was at once arrested.

He pleaded for his life, saying that he was innocent, and had not been out of camp; but he had no one to prove it and he was quickly tried and ordered out to be shot.

It was bright moonlight, when he was marched out to be shot, and he went with a fearless mien that won admiration from all, while he vowed that he was not guilty.

But he was not believed, and many a curse and bitter jest was hurled upon him by his comrades.

Just as the order was given to fire, with a wild yell there dashed down upon the Americans a squadron of lanceros.

Hark Kenton fell at the fire, scattering though it was, and the Americans had to fight back the enemy as best they could.

But they were driven back and the spy was left, as was believed, dead upon the field, along with others slain.

But Hark Kenton, though wounded in several places, was not dangerously hurt. He arose, when Americans and Mexicans had passed on, and, as best he could, made his way to the mountains.

He would not go to join the Mexicans and he dared not return to join his comrades, for he knew that death would await him.

And so he sought refuge in the hills.

Bleeding, suffering and a hunted man, he went on his way until at last he sunk down from sheer exhaustion, and in full view of a camp-fire.

But at that moment a horseman came along, beheld him, called for aid and he was taken into the little camp.

It was weeks before Kenton regained his senses, and then he discovered that those who had befriended him, who had most tenderly nursed him back to life, were a band of Mexican guerrillas, preying alike upon both armies.

They were a desperate lot of men, outlaws, deserters from the Mexican army, mostly; but they had been kind to him, and so he cast his lot with them.

In three months after, when their leader was killed, Kenton was made their chief, taking the name of the dead commander—that of Don Cantrella.

CHAPTER IV.

A FALSE FRIEND.

KENTON had been for half a year the chief of the Mexican bandits, when one day as he sat upon the summit of a hill overlooking a plain, he saw a horseman approaching.

The man had evidently ridden hard, for his horse came along at a jaded gait, and the

rider seemed to urge him in vain to quicken his pace.

Raising a small spyglass to his eye, Don Cantrella sprang to his feet with an oath, as he seemed to recognize the horseman.

"At last! now for my revenge," he said through his shut teeth, and he ran back along the ridge until he came to his temporary camp, in which were a score of his men.

"Men, there is a horseman coming across the plain, and his way will lead him around the base of this hill. Be on the alert to capture him, and let it be done with your lassoes, for I do not wish to harm a hair of his head. When he is your prisoner bring him to me here."

The men obeyed, while Cantrella calmly went back to his point of lookout.

The horseman was now not half a mile away, and he seemed to be gazing at the timbered ridge before him with a desire to read what might be hidden in its recesses.

He came on however without hesitation, and was winding his way among the rocks, around which the trail led, when, with a whizzing sound half a dozen lassoes came flying about him.

Several settled over his head, and others about the head of his horse.

In an instant the animal was securely caught, while the rider's arms were pinned tightly to his side.

In perfect Spanish, as his eyes fell upon his captor, he said sternly:

"Who are you, and why do you make me prisoner, for do you not know I am a Mexican?"

"We are Don Cantrella's band, and the senior chief awaits you," said one of the men.

The prisoner turned pale at this, for he well knew what merciless hands he had fallen into.

He knew that it was said that Don Cantrella was as cruel in his hatred of Americans as he was toward Mexicans, and those who fell into the hands of the outlaw chief need expect only death.

Up the hill he was led by the outlaws and soon they halted in the camp.

Just then, stepping out from behind a huge rock, Don Cantrella confronted the prisoner.

"Great God! Hark Kenton, is this you, or your ghost?" cried the horseman, and his face became very pale.

"It is, in the body, not in the spirit, Moss Reeves," was the low reply.

"You were left for dead upon the field, certainly, after you were—were—"

"Executed as a spy and traitor."

"I am so glad to see you, Kenton; but suppose you are also the prisoner of these cut-throats."

"No."

"What then?"

"I am their chief."

"What?"

"It is true."

"You the chief of these men?"

"Yes, and why not?"

"I did not suspect this of you, Kenton."

"What was I to do?"

"Return to our lines."

"Bah! and be shot!"

"Perhaps you would have been pardoned, after having been wounded, for you certainly fell at the fire."

"Oh, yes, I fell, and had three wounds upon me; but none were fatal, as you see."

"Still, but for these cut-throats, which I admit they are, I would have died."

"I am now, as I said, their chief."

"I am sorry you have descended so low, Kenton."

The young outlaw laughed and replied:

"Moss Reeves, do you think I do not know you as you are?"

"I do not understand you."

"I understand you, for you, not I, were the spy that led the Mexicans upon our camp, and you wore my cloak, gave my name to the sentinel, and saw me shot as a spy, when you were the guilty one. I was jeered by my comrades, and cursed by them; I was led out and shot, as a spy, and because I was not killed was owing to their fear, not their mercy."

"I dared not go to my people, and I would not turn traitor, and, hating those I had loved, and hating the Mexicans as the enemies of my country, I became a bandit."

"Come, Moss Reeves, dismount, for you

have just ten minutes to live, for I will hang you to yonder limb until you are dead."

The man had heard the story of the young bandit with a face that was livid and lips that quivered, in spite of his efforts to appear calm. He was still held close in the coils of the lassoes, so could not move.

As Cantrella spoke, he gave a signal to his men, and the soldier was at once dragged from his horse.

He wore a Mexican uniform over his own, as an American soldier, and this was stripped from him, while a number of papers found upon him were taken by the chief.

"Mercy, Kenton!" cried the doomed man.

"Did you show me mercy, Reeves, when you stood by and saw me led out to die as a base spy and traitor?"

"But I saved your life, so do not now take mine."

"You did not save my life by an act of courage, for those two lanceros knew you as their spy, saw you signal not to kill me and so turned and fled. You see, I know you, señor."

"Mercy, Kenton, and—"

"Hang him up!"

At the command the Mexican, who had already thrown the end of the lasso over the limb of a tree, the other end being around the neck of the doomed wretch, obeyed with alacrity, and Moss Reeves was dragged into mid-air, the tightening coil shutting off his cry for mercy.

With perfect coolness did the outlaw chief stand watching him until he was dead, and then, with a pencil, he wrote a few lines upon a slip of paper and pinned it upon the body.

The papers taken from him he placed again in his pocket, and calling to his men to bring the victim of his revenge along, he mounted his horse and rode away.

The next morning an American sentinel, when the dawn came, beheld a dead form lying not far from his post.

The corporal of the guard was called, and the body was carried to the headquarters of the commanding officer, and that person read aloud what was written upon the slip of paper pinned upon the breast of Moss Reeves.

It was written in a bold hand, and was as follows:

"GENERAL:—
This body in life was known to you as Moss Reeves."

"His real name was Mora Rivera, and he is a Mexican who has long lived in the United States."

"He joined the American army to serve as a spy, and he it was, in wearing my cloak, who gave my name to the sentinel, and I arranged the surprise upon your camp."

"I was accused of being a traitor and a spy, and a drumhead court martial sentenced me to death."

"I was led out to execution and fired upon, but wounded, not killed, and, unwilling to turn traitor, I became the ally of those who had befriended me."

"What I am falsehood made me, and I have gone beyond redemption."

"In the pockets of Mora Rivera you will find plans and papers meant to betray you."

"Accept them with the good will of one who has been a victim of man's inhumanity to man, and who, though once Harry Kenton, an honorable soldier, now subscribes himself with deep regret."

"DON CANTRELLA, the Bandit."

Such was the story of the young outlaw who had captured Isabel Varona on her way to the American camp to save her father's life.

CHAPTER V.

A FAIR PLEADER.

"OH, Señor Americano, he is not guilty! Spare him, I implore you, as you hope for mercy when you come to die!"

It was a strange scene, and one to thrill the heart of every one who beheld it.

The birds chirped merrily in the trees, the wind was balmy and laden with the perfume of many flowers, the skies were blue and cloudless and all nature seemed to invite enjoyment of its beauties.

And yet, cruel, grim-visaged war hung like a pall over the sunny land, and each day graves were made over brave soldiers fallen.

The scene was in the sunny land of Mexico, and the time was while our gallant American army was fighting for honor and fame against the Mexicans.

The hour was sunset, and upon a field were a number of soldiers, wearing the uniform of the United States Army.

In the distance was the camp, with the Stars and Stripes floating over it.

A silence of death was upon the scene, for in fact death was strangely near, as a man was doomed to die. A man of fine presence, courtly manner, and a Mexican.

Dressed as a courtier he stood calm and erect, though his bronzed face was pale, his lips hard set. Before him stood a platoon, the execution squad, and to one side was a group of officers.

The sun had almost touched the horizon when the clatter of hoofs was heard, and then, in the distance appeared a horse and rider.

A sentinel at the outpost tried to check the flying animal, that his rider should not trespass on forbidden ground; but unheeding his challenge she swept on.

Like the very wind went the splendid horse, his nostrils distended, his head outstretched, covered with foam, and, though doing his best, the keen blows of the whip could be heard descending at every jump.

"Halt! who comes—"

But the command of the sentinel was silenced with a quick:

"Stand aside!"

And on went the steed and rider like the wind.

The officers in command looked up with surprise, while from the lips of the doomed man came the words:

"My child! my poor Isabel! She comes but to see me die!"

"Your daughter, sir?" asked the American colonel, stepping to the side of the Mexican.

"Yes, senor."

Another instant and the horse was reined in suddenly and Isabel Varona threw herself from the saddle to the ground and sprung into the arms of her father.

Not a word was spoken, and the eyes of brave soldiers became dim with tears.

The scene was too sacred to be broken in upon even by the stern rule of war.

For an instant did Isabel Varona remain with her arms about her father, and then suddenly springing to the side of the officer she uttered the words that opened this chapter.

"My dear young lady, war is cruel and merciless, and your father was taken within our lines, and papers were found upon him that condemn him to death as a spy," said the American officer.

"It is false! My father is no spy, and he risked his life to enter your lines for a noble purpose. Why do you not say why you came father?"

"I told them that I came here to visit my dying brother, a priest who lives in yonder hacienda dead, for he died as I left his house."

Such was his story, senorita, and it would have been well but for the papers found in his saddle-pocket.

"Speak, father! What were those papers?"

"Ah, child, did I know that I had them, I would not condemn the Americans for putting me to death as a spy. But how they came in my saddle-pocket I do not know."

"The papers were certainly found upon him, senorita, and though we wished to believe his words, for the dead Pedro lies in yonder hacienda, as he says, we could not, with such proof, do other than at once sentence him to death."

"Senor, my father is a soldier, but a peaceful dweller upon his own land, with me and his servants. He left the hacienda two days ago, to visit his twin brother, a priest, who was said to be very ill, and within your lines."

"Now I find him condemned to death as a spy, and you say that papers were found in his saddle-pocket to condemn him as a spy," and Isabel Varona spoke with strange calmness.

"Such is the case, senorita."

"Then there is some mystery in all this, Senor Americano."

"I am sorry, senorita, and I wish you could clear matters up so that your father's life could be spared."

"I can, and I will, if you will give my father twenty-four hours longer to live."

The colonel stood in silent meditation for a moment, and Isabel Varona continued earnestly:

"Spare him until to-morrow's sunset, senor, and give me the power to solve this

mystery in your camp, and to ride to General Santa Ana's quarters. Do this, I beseech you!"

The colonel walked apart to where stood his group of officers, and after a few moments' conversation with them in a low tone, returned, accompanied by a young lieutenant.

Isabel Varona had watched eagerly every look and gesture of the officers, and now turned her eyes appealingly upon the colonel and the young lieutenant who accompanied him.

Then the words came slowly but with delight to her ears:

"In the absence of the general, senorita, I will take the responsibility of postponing the execution for forty-eight hours, and this gentleman, Lieutenant Davis, will serve as your escort while endeavoring to find proof of your father's innocence."

"May Heaven bless you, senor," said Isabel Varona in a low tone, her voice quivering as she spoke with the emotion that nearly overwhelmed her.

Then she turned to her father and said:

"Father, I will go to General Santa Ana and get his pledge of honor that you are no spy."

"I will save you from death."

CHAPTER VI.

WAITING ON THE BRINK OF THE GRAVE.

THE young officer who had been detailed by the colonel, to serve as an escort to the beautiful Mexican maiden, Isabel Varona, was a handsome, dashing man of twenty-seven.

He had entered the army as a Texan Ranger, and his courage had won for him the rank of first lieutenant on the staff.

His uncle, for his parents were dead, had given him a home on his Texas ranch, and the young man saved up enough money to pass three years in a northern college, and, returning to his southern home after graduating, found his old uncle had just died and left him his little property.

Joining the Rangers, Hugh Davis had gone with his command into Mexico, with the American army, and won some distinction.

He doffed his hat in a courtly way, when presented to the maiden, and, having learned to speak Spanish well, had been selected for the guardianship of the lovely Mexican girl, thereby winning the envy of all the other young officers, who vowed at once to begin to study the lingo of the country, for fear another like occasion might present itself.

Having bidden her father adieu, and seen him led off to the guard-house, Isabel Varona turned to the lieutenant, who asked:

"Now, senorita, what is your will?"

"Senor, my father is not guilty, I am sure, for he just vowed to me that he knew nothing of the papers found in his saddle, and I will go to General Santa Ana and have him vouch for his innocence."

"Let us first see what can be done here, senorita."

"Well, senor."

"Had we not better find out if your father mounted his own horse, and if so was it his own saddle and bridle on the animal?"

"Ah, senor, you have indeed given me hope at the start. Will you ask my father, for I do not wish to break military rules by again speaking to him?"

"Come with me, please."

She accompanied him to the guard-house, and the young staff officer had no difficulty in speaking to the prisoner,

"Senor Varona, may I ask if you found your own horse awaiting you, when you left the hacienda where your brother died?"

"Yes, senor."

"And your own saddle and bridle upon him?"

"Yes, senor, all were mine, only the papers within the saddle pocket I knew not the existence of."

"You are sure about the horse and saddle being yours?"

"Sure."

"When did you leave home?"

"Day before yesterday morning, senor."

"Alone?"

"No, senor, my chief herdsman was with me."

"And then?"

"I came to your lines, but was not permitted to enter them."

"And then?"

"I sought a mountain trail by which I knew I could get in."

"Did you disguise yourself?"

"No, senor."

"Well?"

"I told Tonio, my herdsman, to await my return, and I entered your lines. I found my brother dying at the hacienda, and remained until the last. I then departed from the place, was arrested, searched, and the papers were found as you know."

"Who was at the hacienda?"

"Senor Carlos and his family and his servants; but the hacienda being within your lines, they were guarded as you know."

"And did your brother live there?"

"No, but Senor Carlos was his intimate friend, and he was visiting him when your army surrounded the estate, and he was taken sick there, and I learned of his illness through some prisoners who had been exchanged, and so visited him."

"Can you think of no one who is your foe, dwelling at the Carlos hacienda?"

"No, senor."

"Thank you," and Lieutenant Davis turned away and rejoined Isabel, whom he had left outside the inclosure.

"Senorita, will you go with me to the Carlos hacienda?"

"Yes, senor."

"Will you be guided by me?"

"Yes, senor."

"You know the family?"

"I do, senor."

"I will ask their hospitality for you to-night; and I wish you to see every one connected with the establishment and note if there is one whom you would suspect of being your father's enemy."

"Ah, senor, you do indeed intend to help me to save my poor father, and I will do as you wish."

"Be careful to let no one suspect your intention."

"I will be discreet."

"And, after leaving you I will try and find out what it was that led to your father's capture."

The Carlos hacienda was a large structure, and its master was an old man, and a rich one.

They were real Mexicans, hating the Americans with all their heart, but kept within the walls and grounds of the hacienda, as a guard was there to prevent them from going out.

There were half a dozen members in the family, and twice as many servants, some of the latter being the cowboys of the estate.

Isabel Varona was welcomed by the Senor Carlos and his family, while the young officer was pounced upon, and the story soon told of her father's capture and condemnation as a spy.

"I will call for you to-morrow morning, senorita, to escort you under flag of truce to General Santa Ana's lines," said Lieutenant Davis, upon taking his leave.

The next morning he presented himself at the hacienda, and Isabel was awaiting him, the horse which Don Cantrella had given her being at the door ready saddled.

"Well, senorita, what have you discovered?" asked Lieutenant Davis as they rode away together.

"I have found out, senor, that there is a servant at the hacienda, who was once in our home, and—"

"A man?"

"Yes, senor, a peon."

"Well, senorita?"

"He was suspected by my father of some underhand work, and discharged by him."

"Is that all?"

"No, for he was heard to threaten some day to kill my father."

"See if I can describe the man. A young fellow of twenty-four, with a scar upon his left cheek, and strangely white teeth—"

"That is the very man, senor; but, how did you know of him?"

"I simply asked, why the Senor Varona, after having entered our lines and the hacienda, by a secret way, was ambushed and captured on his way out."

"And, senor?"

"Word was taken to the guard-house that a person was to leave the hacienda by yonder

canyon, which has, it seems, a cavern in one end of it that runs under the mountain spur beyond.

"It was that way your father entered, and a guard, acting upon the word given the sentinel, by such a man as I described, lay in wait and captured your father."

"Oh, señor! you will yet save my poor father!"

"I feel it."

"Do not be too hopeful, señorita; but I wish you to write a note for me."

"Certainly."

"Write a note to Señor Carlos to send the peon servant, Nevada, on some excuse to the American headquarters with a note."

"I will see that he is kept there for some time awaiting a response, and when we see him leave the hacienda we will go there and search the effects of the peon, for I have here the papers that condemned your father."

They went to the colonel's tent, and there the note was written and dispatched by a soldier to the band of Señor Carlos, who was told in it what to write, in case the peon should open it.

Then the young officer and Isbel Varona went to a point from whence they could see the messenger leave the hacienda.

They had not long to wait before Isbel cried out:

"Señor, there he goes, and it is Nevada, the peon."

CHAPTER VII.

A MYSTERY TRAILED.

HARDLY had the peon ridden away from the gates of the hacienda of Señor Carlos, when the lieutenant and Isbel Varona left their point of observation and rode down the hill.

Their destination was the hacienda, and they were soon ushered into the presence of the Señor Carlos.

"Señor, I am trying to aid the Señorita Varona to save her father from death, and I believe we are on the right trail to do so."

"You received the letter sent you from headquarters?"

"Yes, señor, and the peon has gone."

"Permit me to ask if I can go to his room in the hacienda and search it?"

"You suspect the man?"

"I do."

"I will take you there myself, while Isbel remains with my wife and daughters."

So saying, the old Mexican led the way to an adobe hut near the stables, and which was the dwelling-place of the peon Nevada.

Lieutenant Davis was a thorough searcher, and every hole and crevice of the dingy abode was looked into.

"Ah! what have we here?"

He drew out of a secure hiding-place as he spoke, a small horn of ink, some quill pens, pencils, a ruler and compasses, all rolled up in some paper upon which were half-drawn maps, by no means badly executed, of the American camp, with notes of guns, force and sentinel posts.

"Your peon servant seems to be a fair draughtsman, Señor Carlos," said the young officer, with a smile.

"So it seems; but I did not know that he could write."

"When he comes back try him, by asking him to write something for you."

"Then send what he writes to me at headquarters, where I will take them."

"I will do so, señor, and if the life of my dead friend is saved, it will be through your kindness."

The two then returned to the hacienda, and leaving Isbel there, Lieutenant Davis went to the colonel's headquarters, meeting the peon just as he was leaving.

"If that fellow is not a double dyed villain none ever lived," said the young officer as the peon rode on.

Arriving at the hacienda, Nevada the peon handed the letter he bore to his master, who broke the seal and read it.

"Hold, Nevada!" he called out.

"Well, señor?"

"That American officer demands a drawing of my hacienda and grounds, and the number and names of my family and servants."

"My hand is too shaky to do it, so if you will find me some one who can do so, I will give him twenty pesos."

"I can use a pen, Señor Master, and learn-

ed to draw a little when I was servant to an engineer in the Vera Cruz barracks.

"Would I do, señor?"

"If you can do the work, yes, so go about it at once, and do the best you can."

The unsuspecting peon quickly obeyed, and in a couple of hours had completed his task.

"You have done well, Nevada."

"Now mount your horse and take it over to the American headquarters."

The peon did as he was told, and, arriving at the colonel's quarters sent in the paper by an orderly.

In the tent sat the colonel commanding that wing of the army, and with him were several officers, among whom was Lieutenant Davis.

Before the colonel, upon the table, were spread out the papers which had condemned Señor Varona as a spy, and those which had been, found in the peon's adobe hut.

When the package from Carlos was opened, with a short note stating that the within was the work of Nevada the peon, the proof was conclusive.

"The man threatened the life of Señor Varona, he was the one who told the sentinel to have a party on hand in the canyon to capture and search him, and he drew these maps, and wrote the notes, that is certain, and placed them in the saddle pocket to thus get his revenge."

"Lieutenant Davis, you have been lawyer, detective, and soldier, in this affair, and deserve the highest credit, for you saved an innocent man from death."

"Orderly!"

"Yes, sir."

"Ask that peon to come in here, and then send a corporal and five men to my quarters at once."

"Yes, sir," and the orderly disappeared.

Soon after the unsuspecting peon entered and gave a military salute.

"What is your name, my man?"

"Nevada, señor."

"Well, Señor Nevada, do you know that you have been guilty of an attempt at the foulest kind of murder?"

"Señor!" and the man started.

"To get revenge against your former master, you sought to have him shot as a spy, and as the hour for his execution was to have been at sunset to-morrow, I will simply put you in his place, and do the Mexican Government a service thereby."

"Madre de Dios! Señor Americano, will you kill me?" cried the peon, now livid with fright.

"I will do so, for you plotted to have an honorable man die an ignominious death, and to cause me to sentence him to die when innocent, thus bringing upon me the sorrow of an act of great injustice."

"You undertook to use the United States Army as a tool for your revenge, and you shall find that you shall die by the weapon you played with."

"Seize him, corporal, place him in irons, and take him to the guard-room."

The corporal and his men had arrived and the orders were quickly obeyed.

"Lieutenant Davis, will you kindly go to the guard-house, release the Señor Varona, and ask him to come with you to my quarters?"

Hugh Davis was only too glad of the chance, and was not very long in getting to the guard-house.

"Ah, señor, you bring me hope, for I read it in your face," said Pasqual Varona, as the young officer approached him.

"Yes, Señor Varona, I am glad to say you are a free man."

"Sergeant take the irons off of the Señor Varona."

This was done and the Mexican grasped the hand of the handsome young American while he said earnestly, in Spanish:

"I owe this to you."

"Oh no, you owe it to your daughter, for, but for her coming as she did, you would have been a dead man."

"But you see that man?"

"It is Nevada, the peon, and in irons?"

"Yes."

"A prisoner?"

"Under death sentence, and he dies to-morrow at sunset," and as Hugh Davis spoke the prisoner and his guard approached them.

"Ah, Señor Verona! You win this game; but these accursed Gringos will not dare put me to death," hissed the peon.

Señor Varona made no reply, but he thought differently, after the experience that he had just had, and with deepest interest as they walked toward the quarters of the commander, heard the story of the peon's attempt to sacrifice him to his revenge.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PARTING.

"SEÑOR Varona, accept my congratulations upon your escape, and pardon me the mistake I made, which was so nearly fatal to you," said the colonel, as Hugh Davis entered his quarters with Señor Varona.

"I do not blame you, Señor Colonel, nor will I hold the slightest ill-will, for it was a plot against me by one of my own people, and certainly the evidence was sufficient for you to believe me guilty."

"Let it pass, señor, and accept my unbounded thanks, and friendship, though our nations are at war."

The colonel grasped the hand of the Mexican warmly, and then said:

"Lieutenant Davis, will you go to the hacienda of Señor Carlos and acquaint the Señorita Varona with the news of her father's release, at the same time telling her that you will serve as an escort out of our lines, when she is ready to depart?"

"Yes, sir, I will go at once," and Hugh Davis was glad of the chance, for the beautiful eyes of Isbel Varona were wounding him fatally at every glance.

"One moment, señor," said the Mexican, and the lieutenant halted.

"Señor Colonel, my brother, Padre Palma Varona, lies dead in the house of Señor Carlos, and awaits the coming through your lines of his brother priests to bear him away to the monastery for burial. May I, and my daughter, remain as guests of Señor Carlos until they come, and accompany my poor brother's remains through your lines to his grave?"

"Certainly, señor, and all that I can do shall be gladly done, while my sympathy is yours in your affliction."

"Hold, Davis! and the señor will himself acquaint the señorita with his release."

The face of the young officer changed a shade at this, but the señor said:

"I will be glad to have Lieutenant Davis as my escort to the hacienda, if he will go with me."

Hugh Davis was only too willing, and as Isbel Varona wrung his hand, while tears came in her eyes, and thanked him as the savior of her father from an ignominious death, he felt that he was more than repaid for what he had done.

The Señor Varona told them how he was to await the coming of the priests, for they had been given a permit to pass through the lines and remove the body of their dead brother, and added:

"We will go with them, Isbel, my child, and see my poor brother Palma laid to rest."

Isbel Varona started, and her face wore a troubled look. This did not escape the eye of the young officer.

"Father, you go with the body of uncle Palma, but I must return home."

"I prefer you to accompany me, my child."

"I cannot, father."

Señor Varona seemed surprised, and asked:

"But why?"

"I must return at once to the hacienda, father."

"You certainly cannot return alone, and I must go with my brother's body."

"I came alone, father, and will so return."

"Permit me to accompany you, señorita, with a squad of cavalry, until we are near your lines?" said Hugh Davis.

"No, señor, I must go alone, for you would only run upon a Mexican ambush and bloodshed would follow."

"You must go with me, Isbel," said Señor Varona, somewhat sternly.

"I must return home, father, and as you remain here over night, I will start now, asking Lieutenant Davis to accompany me through the American lines."

Señor Varona still urged; but the maiden, to the surprise of all, would have her own

way, and telling her father that she would hope to see him as soon as his brother was laid to rest, she left the room to prepare for her journey.

"Why, Isabel, where did you get that horse?" asked Senor Varona with surprise, as the splendid steed of the Mexican bandit chief was led up to the door with the maiden's saddle and bridle on.

Isabel's face flushed, and she replied, lightly:

"Oh, it's a new animal which I have gotten since you left home, father."

"He is a splendid beast, but looks like a very devil."

"He is as fleet as the wind, sir, and speed is what I needed yesterday," was the significant reply.

Her father kissed her lightly on the forehead and then raised her into the saddle, while the lieutenant, with a bow to the Senor Varona and the family of the master of the hacienda, sprung upon the back of his spirited horse and the two dashed away.

Passing through the American camp, Isabel Varona asked to go by headquarters that she might thank the colonel, and this she did with a depth of feeling that showed her gratitude.

"You need have no more dread of the man, senorita, for he dies at sunset to-morrow," said the colonel, and then he added:

"I say, lieutenant, get a score of men and escort the senorita on her road home as far as you deem it safe."

But this Isabel would not hear to, and, after Hugh Davis had accompanied her, against her urging his return, for half a mile beyond the last American sentinel, she halted and said:

"Now I will not allow you to go a step further, senor."

"Only a little way," he pleaded.

"Not a step."

"But, you have long miles to go alone."

"I am in no danger, senor."

"Well, I will risk any danger to escort you further on your way."

"You must leave me here."

"You ask it then?"

"I command it, senor, and as a true soldier you must obey!"

"And is this to be your parting?"

"Yes."

"Forever?"

She started, and the hot blood rushed into her face.

"If our nations were not at war, I would ask you to come to our home as a friend."

"Can we not be friends though our people are foes?"

"You have been so good, so noble, and I owe you so much I feel that you are my friend, and I will say to you that a warm welcome will await you whenever you care to come to the Hacienda Varona. *Adios*, senor, and may the Blessed Virgin guard you, and spare your life."

She threw him a kiss from the tips of her fingers and was gone.

He dared not follow her further, and sat upon his horse watching her until she disappeared from his sight far down the valley.

Then, with a sigh he turned his horse toward camp, and as he rode along said musingly:

"That little Mexican maid has won my heart, that is certain."

"Now here I am shooting at Mexicans with real delight, and yet desperately in love with a daughter of this sunny land."

"Ah me! I wish this war was over," and as he could not end it single-handed, Hugh Davis put spurs to his horse and went dashing back to camp at a gallop, anxious by rapid riding to drown thought.

CHAPTER IX.

TO KEEP HER PLEDGE.

THE reason why Isabel Varona would not accompany her father, to the burial of his brother, the Padre Palma, has doubtless been correctly surmised by the reader.

It was on account of her pledge given to Don Cantrella the bandit chief, to meet him at the Mustang Spring, and bring him the money he had demanded for her ransom.

She had given her pledge in good faith, and, accepting it the guerrilla chief had not only allowed her to go, but had presented her with his own horse to ride.

But for the speed of that animal she knew that she would not have arrived in time to have saved her father's life, for she had only a few minutes to spare as it was.

Having saved her father, through her pledge to the bandit, she would not break it.

She dared not make known to her father the pledge she had given.

She well knew that where he would not have taken the money into consideration, he would have prevented keeping her appointment with an outlaw.

Then, too, if she told Lieutenant Davis, he might feel it his duty to prevent her going, or at least to be there to capture the bandit.

Don Cantrella having kept faith with her, she would not do that which would lead to his capture.

So Isabel had argued to herself and she returned home with the firm determination to meet the outlaw chief and to carry with her the five thousand pesos which she had pledged as her ransom money.

Well aware that her father had his gold and jewels hidden away in a secret place, and that he kept the key, Isabel had gotten her father to let her take the keys, under pretense of getting something from his treasures, which she inferred she wished to present to Lieutenant Davis as a souvenir.

"I have there a jewel-hilted sword, Isabel, of great value and beauty, and you had better take that, as it will be appropriate, and Tonio can take it to the outposts for you," her father had said, when he handed over the keys.

"Yes, father, it would be an appropriate souvenir," returned Isabel, and she quickly pocketed the keys.

After leaving Lieutenant Davis she had not gone very far when a horseman suddenly rode down into the highway before her.

It was the faithful Tonio, who had also been captured by the bandits, but when he told his mission, going on after Isabel, had promptly been released, which he had cause to congratulate himself that he had not even been robbed.

He had approached as near to the lines of the Americans as he had dared, and there, though worn out and hungry, had waited, hoping for the return of the maiden with her father.

His face was clouded with dread, as he saw her returning alone; but it brightened up when he saw her look of joy, and he fairly shouted with delight when he heard all, for Tonio was as true as steel to the Varonas, in whose service he had been since boyhood.

Accompanied by Tonio Isabel went on her way, passing the body of her mustang, which the wolves were making a feast on, and, without adventure arriving at the hacienda a little after nightfall.

Isabel was quite broken down, after all that she had gone through in the past two days; but she knew that she could only visit the hiding-place of her father's treasure by night, and she dared not await until the next day.

So, when all in the hacienda had retired, she took a lamp and started for the spot where the treasure was kept.

In one wing of the large and rambling structure was an old chapel, where a dozen generations of the Varonas had worshiped and been buried.

In long years gone by a padre had been kept at the hacienda, to say mass and absolve the sins of the master, his family and servants.

But when Senor Pasqual and his brother Palma had been the only survivors of the once numerous family, and the latter had become a priest himself, after the death of their aged tutor, a most worthy padre, no other had been domiciled there.

Once each month, however, some priest from a neighboring village, was wont to hold service there in the old chapel, and to hear the confessions of the master, his daughter and the servants.

A gloomy place was the old chapel by day, and by night it was certainly a forbidding place to venture into.

But Isabel Varona was a brave girl, and having pledged her word to the bandit chief, she would not break it.

So, lamp in hand, she wended her way into the chapel.

She had been forced to retire, to disarm

suspicion, and her maid had undressed her and then sought her own bed.

So Isabel was in her night-robe, and upon her tiny feet wore soft slippers that gave back no sound.

That no light might be seen from the chapel windows by the men in the stable yard, should any be still up, she shaded it with her scarf and glided on down the aisle.

She knew that scores of dead lay in the vault beneath the chancel, and she shuddered at having to go there.

But she was determined, and on she went, her long white robe de nuit, and her hair falling far down her back, giving her the appearance of a ghost.

Suddenly she started for a sound fell upon her ear, and uncovering her lantern she raised it quickly above her head.

Then there rung through the chapel a wild, unearthly shriek, and a form darted before her and sprung from the window at the rear of the chapel.

With a moan Isabel sunk upon the floor in a swoon, the lamp falling from her hand and being shivered to atoms upon the stone floor.

Then all was darkness, all was silent as the tomb.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FATE OF THE PLOTTERS.

WHEN Isabel Varona returned to consciousness, she at first could hardly recall the situation in which she found herself; but it soon came to her in all its appalling vividness, and she staggered to her feet and felt her way rapidly along to the door of the chapel.

Back into the lighted hallway she went and then her courage returned to her.

She had heard a wild cry of alarm, and seen a man's form, and he had sprung from her and dashed through the chancel window, she thought.

This much she seemed to recall, and more she could not remember.

Whoever it was had been as much alarmed at her coming, as she had been at beholding him.

She then thought of her white robe and flowing hair, and how she might readily be mistaken for a ghostly form in that sepulchral home of the dead.

"I will return, for I must not be driven from my purpose. Wherever it was, he was there to rob, and I have surely frightened him half out of his wits. I will get my father's revolver and return."

So saying she went into the library and took from a drawer a revolver which she knew was always kept loaded. Then she took a hand lamp from a stand and lighting it bravely returned to the chapel.

She no longer tried to shield the light, for as the scream of the one she had surprised in the chapel, and the ring of the shattered lamp aroused no one, all were certainly sound asleep.

She passed the pieces of lamp and went on to the chancel.

There, to her surprise she found the trap open which led to the vault.

The man had evidently just opened it, when he discovered her approach.

Down the stairway she went, into the loathsome place, and she could hear her heart beat in the dread silence about her.

About her were her dead kindred, for generations back, sealed up within the narrow apertures into which the coffins were placed.

Iron doors closed them within, and these were opened with keys.

To one of these iron doors she went, and on the bunch of keys she carried in her hand she found one to fit the lock. It turned the bolt with a cracking sound, and a coffin was revealed within.

But the lid of the coffin she raised, by touching a spring, and it revealed, not a corpse within, but a number of bags of gold, silver and jewelry.

The jewel-hilted sword, which her father had suggested as a souvenir for Lieutenant Hugh Davis was there, with gem-hilted daggers, silver plate and numberless articles of value, the heirlooms of a century or more from long dead Varonas.

One of the bags of gold she took out of

the coffin, and upon it was a tag, whereon was written:

"Five thousand pesos."

Having taken this, and it was no light weight, she closed the lid, shut the iron door, locked it and returned to the chapel above.

The trap was lowered into place, the open window, which the man had gone through, was closed, the pieces of lamp were gathered up and then Isbel left the chapel and went to the library.

There she hid the bag of gold, and throwing away the broken glass, she returned to her room.

With a bound she was in her bed and then her brave nature once more gave way under the shock, and she moaned away.

In the morning she was awakened by her maid, Fanita, and it was some time before she heard what the peon girl was rattling off, so dull felt her head, so confirmed were her ideas.

"What is it, Fanita?" she said impatiently.

"Ah, senorita, Rio Grande Jose has been found dead under the chapel window, and his house was broken in, but who killed him no one knows."

Isbel's face flushed and then paled, while she asked:

"Was not Rio Grande Jose one of Senor Carlos's men?"

"Yes, senorita."

"He was a great friend of Nevada, the peon?"

"Yes, senorita."

"And left here when my father discharged Nevada?"

"Yes, senorita."

"What was he doing here?"

"I do not know, senorita, only Tonio found him lying beneath the end window of the chapel this morning, and he was dead."

After a moment, as Fanita turned away, wondering that her mistress took it so quietly, Isbel Varona said to herself:

"They were friends, and it was a plot for Nevada to kill my father and Jose to rob him."

"The latter killed himself in his spring from the window last night, and Nevada is to die to-day at sunset."

"Their punishment has been deadly indeed."

CHAPTER XI.

AN OUTLAW LOVER.

THOUGH a word from her could solve the mystery of the man Jose's death, Isbel did not utter that word. She did not know that any one had suspected that her father had found a secure hiding place for his wealth, and yet Jose had known it.

He had, with Nevada, doubtless played the spy upon her father, when they were in service at Varona hacienda, and Jose, knowing that the senor was under sentence of death, had come to the ranch to rob it of its treasures.

"By that bandit's making me pledge to bring to him my ransom money, I have saved for my father a large fortune, for that wretch would have robbed him of all," said Isbel, as she sat musing over her breakfast.

All that day she seemed *distracted*, and toward evening ordered her horse, the one the bandit had given her.

Jose had been taken to a cabin, to await the coming of the padre to bury him, and it had been decided by the ranchmen that he had been riding by, and very drunk, had been thrown by his horse against the chapel and thus killed.

Such might have been the case, Isbel saw, in hearing the explanation of Tonio and looking the ground over; but she did not give a hint that such was not the case, and that the dead man had sprung from the window twenty feet above, and in his fright had fallen on his head, thus killing him.

"Shall Tonio accompany you, senorita?"

"No, Fanita, I will go alone," said Isbel, and she carried her bag of gold under her scarf, and was soon after mounted and riding toward the Mustang Spring, the place of rendezvous appointed by Don Cantrella.

Beneath her scarf Isbel also carried a small revolver, which she had taken good care to load most carefully, for she was determined to have the means of self-protection should she have to defend herself.

She reached the Mustang Spring a little earlier than the time appointed, but did not dismount, remaining in her saddle with the bag of gold in her lap, and the revolver hidden under one end of her scarf, and conveniently near her hand.

The Mustang Spring had received its name from its having been a famous resort for wild horses, hunters for leagues and leagues away always feeling sure of catching a herd in that vicinity.

It bubbled out of a mountain spur, into a basin, a pool formed of rock, and then wound away through the timber in a tiny rivulet.

The spur rose above it a hundred feet, bold, rocky, steep, and with stunted trees growing in the crevices of the cliff.

From the spring the land sloped away to a plain half a mile distant, and the large trees growing near formed a fine natural park, where wild horses, deer, buffalo and carnivorous beasts were wont to congregate to avoid the heat of the sun on the plains.

As Isbel approached the spring she was surprised to see no animals near, for often had she been there before, in her rides with her father and an escort, and never did she remember not to have seen a wild horse, a deer or a wolf fly in alarm at her approach.

Now the park was deserted, and about the spring there was not visible a living creature.

For some ten minutes she sat there waiting, her manner impatient and nervous, and then her horse pricked up his ears. "Someone is coming," said Isbel.

For a few minutes more, following the gaze of the horse, she beheld a form advancing.

It was a horse, and upon his back was a rider.

"It is the bandit chief," muttered Isbel, and she became pale, though her face did not lose its courageous look.

The approaching horseman had seen her as quickly as she had him, and he came on at a canter.

He was mounted upon a handsome animal, white as snow, and with long mane and tail, while his Mexican saddle and bridle were very elegant and bespangled with silver.

He was dressed in the finest of costumes belonging to the country, and his sombrero was a mass of silver embroidery, while his weapons, consisting of a short sword, revolver in his belt, and a pair of revolvers in his saddle holsters were all gold mounted.

The Bandit chief had evidently taken pains to look his best for the occasion. His handsome face had a pleasant smile upon it, as he raised his broad sombrero and bowed low to Isbel Varona.

She returned the bow coldly, and said:

"Senor Chief, as you placed faith in my word, and permitted me to go to save my father, I come to prove that your trust was not abused, and I bring you the ransom money you demanded, five thousand pesos."

"My dear senorita, the trust you place in me, in coming here, I more than appreciate, and I am glad to know that you arrived in time to save your father from death."

"You know it then?"

"Yes, there is little that takes place in either army that I do not know," he said with a smile.

"Then you know the treacherous act of the man who sought to have my father die an ignominious death, to gain his revenge?"

"Yes, senorita."

"But, senor, here is your gold, and your horse I will send back to you to-morrow, for I dared not bring any one with me to-day."

"The horse, senorita, I beg you to accept, for I so meant it when I gave him to you."

"No, I cannot accept such a gift, though, if you are willing to sell him I will pay you your price."

"I am not willing to sell him, and I beg that you will accept the animal."

"No, senor, he shall be returned to this spot within a couple of days, and left here for you. Here is your gold."

"I wish not the gold, senorita."

"You demanded a ransom, and I have brought it."

"It was but to see you again."

"To see me?"

"Yes, for not a *peso* of your money would I touch, Senorita Varona."

"I regret that I came here then, senor, for I assure you it was a great struggle for me to keep faith with—"

She paused, and he said with a smile:

"With an outlaw, you would say?"

"Yes."

"Well, you did keep faith, and I respect you the more for it."

"Now keep your gold, senorita, and you are free to return to your home; but let me tell you that I will watch over you most carefully, no harm shall befall you, and, if you need a friend, one who will give his life for you, come to this spot, and place a note in yonder crevice of the rock, saying what you would wish, and you will find that, though an outlaw, my word is true as steel."

"Here, senorita, take this little emblem; wear it for my sake, and should an outlaw halt you on the highway again, show this to him, and it will be respected. 'It is the secret badge I give for protection. Wear it.'"

It was a tiny gold sword, arranged as a pin, and beneath it was engraven:

"Respect the wearer."

"DON CANTRELLA."

Ere Isbel could refuse he had pinned it upon her scarf, and the act disclosed the revolver clutched in her hand.

"Ah! you expected to meet one you feared to trust."

"Do not doubt me again, senorita, for I love you! Adios."

He raised his sombrero as he spoke and turned away quickly, but halted and looked back, while he said:

"I beg you to keep the horse until I send for him. Again Adios."

The spurs touched the flanks of the splendid white animal that he rode, and away he dashed down the glade. While Isbel was about to start home, in bewildered wonderment at what had occurred, she heard her name softly spoken.

She reined in her horse and glanced about her.

Was she mistaken?

No, for again came the voice calling:

"Senorita Varona!"

CHAPTER XII.

AN EAVESDROPPER.

THE experience which Lieutenant Hugh Davis had had, as a boy and youth upon the prairies of Texas, and afterward as a Texan Ranger, had made of him a most thorough plainsman, and no better scout was then with the American army in Mexico than the young officer had proven himself to be.

He had, the day following the close call which the Senor Varona had had with death, asked permission to go upon a scout, to see just what the Mexicans were about.

The positions of the two armies at that time was a peculiar one.

The Mexicans were guarding a pass into a rich valley beyond, and their outposts were scattered in a semicircle for many miles from their base.

The American army was encamped in the foothills of a lofty mountain range, and kept their lines drawn close, not extending over two miles from camp.

They could see up and down the valley for a long distance, and the haciendas of the rich rancheros were respected by them as much as possible.

Down the valley, where a mountain spur jutted into it, was the disputed ground between the two armies, and here it was, with the fastnesses behind him to retreat to, that Don Cantrella, the bandit chief, held full sway.

Having to go upon his scouting expedition, Hugh Davis was well aware that he was as likely to run upon bands of Indians, as upon Mexican cavalry.

But he had perfect confidence in himself as a scout, and held no fear.

His real object was, to tell the truth, a desire to go to the home of Isbel Varona.

He knew that it was leagues away, that the Mexicans swarmed about the country, and the outlaws were a dangerous gantlet to run, but he was anxious to see the beautiful maiden again, to show her what he had risked to visit her, and so he asked the colonel to allow him to go upon a scout, hoping also to glean more valuable information about the army.

So, well mounted, thoroughly armed, and with a couple of days' rations, he rode away from the army camp the day after the departure of Isbel Varona.

When a few miles from camp he knew that he had gone farther than any American had yet dared to go.

But, he pressed on, avoiding the trails all he could, cautiously watching every rock and bush before him, and ready at a moment to greet a foe.

At length he came to the foot of a ridge, from the top of which he thought he could gain an extensive view before him.

Dismounting, he led his horse up the steep hillside, and upon reaching the top, found a secure hiding place for the animal, where there was both good grass and a spring of water.

Leaving the animal to graze, he made his way to the end of the spur, which he observed ended almost in a precipice.

Beneath him he beheld a large pool of water, fed by a spring bubbling forth from the foot of the hill, and the trampled ground about it showed that it was a watering-place for wild beasts.

In fact, he saw a number of animals about him, which were good proof that no human being was around, unless, like himself, he had not been seen.

A shout startled the animals, a wild horse or two, some deers and wolves, and they ran hastily away.

Having taken a survey of the surrounding country, Hugh Davis was about to return to his horse, when his eyes fell upon a horseman not far distant, who suddenly rode out from a small canyon.

Almost instantly he rode back again, and soon after another rider approached in sight.

Just as this second rider passed the spot, when the former one had ridden out of the canyon, the lieutenant leveled his glass and the words broke from his lips:

"It is the Senorita Varona!"

He seemed greatly surprised, and could only think that she was on her way to the American camp.

He saw that she would have to come near him, and he meant to hail her, make his presence known, and then going back to his horse, join her in the valley.

But, to his delight he saw that she was coming directly toward the spring fifty feet beneath the clump of vines in which he was hidden.

Hardly had he discerned that her intention was to visit the spring, when his point of observation giving him a good view, he caught sight of another horse and rider.

The latter was also coming toward the Mustang Spring.

Turning his glass upon the latter, he said:

"It is that poor fellow Kenton, whose misfortunes made an outlaw of him."

He dared not now attract the attention of Isbel Varona, as Don Cantrella was not far away, and so he waited, determined to protect the maiden if necessary, from his position, and for this purpose he drew his revolver and held it ready for instant use.

He saw that Isbel Varona halted, as though to await some one, and his heart almost ceased to beat when he discovered that she was waiting for the coming of the bandit chief beyond all doubt.

His love for the beautiful Mexican girl received a fearful shock at this.

"What can she have in common with that man?"

"It is certainly a meeting by appointment. I hate to be an eavesdropper, but I cannot well help it, and if she is such, as her meeting this man now indicates, I am glad to know it!"

So mused the young American officer, and a moment after Don Cantrella rode up, and the scene, which the reader is aware of, followed between the two, Hugh Davis an unintentional listener to all that was said, and his face lighted up with pleasure when he discovered that Isbel Varona was as true as steel.

CHAPTER XIII. RESPECTED.

WHEN Lieutenant Hugh Davis saw Isbel Varona about to ride away from the Mustang Spring, after the bandit chief had departed, he softly called her name.

She started, halted, and with wondering look gazed about her.

Again he repeated the name, and then, as Don Cantrella had disappeared, he stepped out from the clump of pines, in full view.

She uttered a cry of mingled surprise and pleasure, as she recognized him, and called up:

"Oh, senor! why are you there?"

"Will you ride around the mountain spur, up the valley a short distance, and I will join you?"

"I should return home at once."

"Pray do as I beg of you, for I have something to make known to you."

She bowed and rode away, and Hugh Davis hastily retraced his way to his horse, threw the saddle upon him and called to the well-trained animal to follow him down the steep hillside.

As he reached the valley he saw Isbel Varona awaiting him.

"Ah, senor, you are a sad eavesdropper," she said, as she held forth her hand, and added:

"But I forgive you."

"You can afford to; as I heard nothing to your detriment, senorita; but let me explain my awkward position in the affair, for I would not you should think ill of me for an instant."

Then he told her how he had started on a scout, intending to try and look in at the Varona Hacienda, and had seen her approach, and, ere he could make his presence known to her, Don Cantrella had appeared.

"Poor fellow, I pity him," he gave the story of the bandit chief's sorrows and misfortunes which had driven him into outlawry.

"I cannot but respect him, senor, bandit though he is, and I must tell you just why."

She made known her adventure with the outlaws, and added:

"And now, you know why I would not go with my father to the funeral of my poor uncle, Padre Palma. I had pledged my word to the chief to bring him the amount he claimed as my ransom. I dared not tell my father, for I knew he would not permit it, and you I would not inform of my intention, fearing you would attack the outlaws, to protect me, and, after what he had done for me I was determined to keep faith with him. But it greatly startled me to have him tell me he loved me."

"You will be very often startled, senorita, with the same kind of information from the lips of men," said Hugh Davis, and at his words the beautiful eyes dropped before his gaze.

"But, senor," she said, quickly, "I must tell you of my adventure in getting the gold."

And she did so, and then, with a hesitating look said:

"There! I have told you, an American soldier in Mexico, just where my father keeps his treasures, and your army will doubtless be in possession of our hacienda before very long, for you Americans seem irresistible at arms."

"I wish I knew one who could prove irresistible against a fair Mexican lady," was the low reply, and seeing her face flush, he added:

"But you need have no fear of telling me your secret, as to where your treasure lies, for your father's hacienda holds a treasure to me dearer than all of his gold and jewels."

"Ah, senor, I fear you Americans are fearful flatterers."

"No, I could utter no false word with your honest eyes upon me."

"Ah! I must return, senor, and—"

"Permit me to accompany you?"

"It is a great risk, senor, for we are liable to meet both bandits and Mexican lanceros."

"I will take all risks to go with you, as far as you will permit me."

"Well, you may come as far as the pass yonder, and it is two miles from here, and she pointed out a bold cliff in the distance.

Wheeling by her side, as she turned her horse homeward, they rode slowly along together, Hugh Davis falling more and more in love with the lovely girl.

Soon they came to a narrow canyon, and suddenly, without warning, a score of wild-looking men seemed to spring out of the very rocks, and up from the ground, and surround them.

The lieutenant, quick as a flash seized the bridle-rein of Isbel's horse, and, leveling his revolver attempted to dash through them.

But, though two men dropped dead in their tracks, under the true aim of the offi-

cer, his horse fell under the fire of his assailants, and in a moment more the gallant soldier would have been slain, when loud and clear came the words from the Mexican girl:

"Respect this pledge!"

As she spoke Isbel Varona held aloft the gold badge given her by the chief.

Instantly the men shrunk back, and one of them said politely:

"We respect the pledge, senorita, and would never have attacked you had we known you had it."

"Go on your way, you and the American senor, though he has killed two of our men."

"I thank you, senors," said Isbel, while Hugh Davis, glad to get out of a bad scrape, added:

"And I also thank you, senors."

"The chief!" cried a voice, and suddenly out of a canyon dashed a horseman, riding at full speed, and with a revolver in his hand, for he had heard the firing while some distance away and knew that his men had found some game to pick.

"What! senorita Varona, it is you that is in trouble?"

"And you too, Lieutenant Davis?"

"Men, you have made a bad mistake here, for this lady wears the protection badge, and you, too, shall have it, lieutenant, as a mark of my respect for you."

"See, men, this American officer is under my protection."

As he spoke Don Cantrella handed to Hugh Davis a pin, such as he had given Isbel Varona, and the young officer accepted it with the remark:

"I thank you, Kenton, and I hope I may some day offer you protection; but I was not looking for an attack, and was surprised by your men."

"Surprised? Well, it is lucky for them that they surprised you, as I see you killed two of them."

"But you need a horse—accept mine."

"No, no, I cannot, for—"

"You must, for I have a number."

"You know it is very easy for me to get horses, for *they cost me nothing*; so take this animal, I beg of you."

"Here, one of you men change the saddle and bridle from that dead horse to mine," and Don Cantrella sprang to the ground.

"You place me under deep obligations to you, Kenton."

"Do not speak of it, sir, for you were ever kind to me, and fought hard to save me, asserting to the last your belief in my innocence."

"It was proven in the end that you were right; but I had gone to the bad then, and so I am what I am—an outlaw."

"Senorita Varona, I regret that you have met with such a scene," and the bandit chief turned to Isbel, who replied:

"Senor, in these days of carnage we must expect strange sights. "I unexpectedly met Lieutenant Davis, who saved my father from death, and he was escorting me toward my home, when we came upon your men here. I will now ride on."

"And still accept me as an escort until you reach the other valley, I hope?" said Hugh Davis, adding with a smile:

"For there is nothing to fear, now that we hold these badges of protection from our friend, the chief here."

"I am your friend, Lieutenant Davis, and the friend of this lady. More than that I cannot say. "Adios, senor, and senorita," and raising his sombrero, he walked back toward the canyon from whence he had come, his men following with their dead comrades and the saddle and bridle stripped from the splendid white steed which Hugh Davis had now mounted, and which bristled a little under his change of masters, but was soon subdued by the young officer, who was a superb horseman.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RIVAL IN THE FIELD.

ISBEL VARONA was anxious to have the young American officer turn back after the tragic adventure with the bandits, for she really felt nervous about his safety.

But Hugh Davis was not of a nature to dread danger, and he was anxious to continue on with the maiden until she would allow him to go no further.

As they now had nothing to fear from the bandits, with the protection badges which they wore, Lieutenant Davis had little dread of meeting with Mexican cavalry, while he was also desirous of ascertaining if there were really any bodies of troops moving about the valley, or encamped in force there.

Isbel was more than glad of the company of her handsome escort, who had done so much for her and her father; but she felt anxious for his sake.

His quick and deadly aim, and standing at bay against the bandits, had shown her a specimen of his magnificent courage, and she could not but admire him the more.

So she yielded a reluctant consent, and allowed him to ride on with her, when they reached the pass which she had named as the limit for him to go, when they started together from the Mustang Spring.

"How far beyond the pass here is your home, senorita," he asked, as he saw the sun nearing the western horizon, and wondered if he dared not go all the way.

"Two leagues, senor."

He was about to reply, when there came in Spanish, sharp and stern:

"Halt, for your lives!"

The impulse was upon the young soldier to wheel and fly, but instantly the grasp of Isbel Varona was upon his arm, and she said quickly and earnestly:

"Stay! they are lanceros!"

As she spoke, a large troop of Mexican lanceros appeared in sight, and Hugh Davis felt that he was already caught.

Before he could utter a word, there darted up to them an officer splendidly mounted, and resplendent in the gorgeous uniform of a captain of lanceros.

"You are my prisoner, senor!" he said sharply, and then turning quickly to Isbel, he waived his embroidered sombrero, and said:

"Ah, my sweet cousin! this is an unexpected pleasure; but was the Americano your prisoner, or you his?"

Hugh Davis saw that the Mexican officer was a handsome man, yet his face was dark and sinister, and he appeared like one whose friendship it was better to have than his ill will.

Addressing Isbel as he had, he knew that she must be related to him, and he recognized the lanceros as a dashing band of Mexican cavalry which had given the American troops a great deal of trouble.

At sight of the officer the face of Isbel Varona had flushed and paled alternately; but when he addressed her as he did, she replied:

"Cousin Pierre, this gentleman is not a prisoner, nor am I one."

"My father owes his life to him, and he was but serving as my escort thus far upon my way home."

"Senor Davis, permit me to present my cousin, Captain Roscaro of the lanceros, who will join his thanks with mine for the services you have rendered his kindred."

Hugh Davis bowed, but he saw that the Mexican was not well pleased with his having found him the companion of his fair cousin.

"I greet the Senor Davis, but I would know more for what I am to give an enemy my thanks," said Captain Roscaro.

"A mere trivial matter, senor, that the Senorita Varona is, I am afraid, willing to exaggerate into a service rendered," replied the lieutenant.

"Pardon me, no; but, cousin, as you are in ignorance of recent happenings, permit me to tell you that my uncle, the Padre Palma is dead, he having died several days ago at the hacienda of Senor Carlos."

"My father went thither to visit his dying brother, and going through the American lines by a secret way, on his return was captured, and papers were found upon him which condemned him to death as a spy."

The Mexican's face flushed, and he uttered a suppressed oath, and Isbel continued:

"I arrived just in time to stop the execution, and through the senor lieutenant here, I discovered that my father was innocent, he having been the victim of Nevada the peon's revenge, who had placed those papers in his saddle pocket, and then told the Americans how to arrest and search him."

"The base dog," said the Mexican.

"He will die at sunset to-day, Cousin

Pierre, for the American commander at once released my father and condemned the peon to death."

"And your father, Cousin Isbel?"

"Remained at the Carlos Hacienda to attend the burial of Uncle Palma, while I decided to come home, and thus far the lieutenant is my escort."

Without telling a story, Isbel allowed the Mexican captain to believe that she was just then on her way home from the American camp, and this Hugh Davis noticed.

But he felt that for some reason she did not wish her cousin to know that she had already been home, since the affair at camp.

"This is a remarkable story you tell me, my cousin, and I have indeed to thank the Senor American, and regret that it is my painful duty to hold him my prisoner."

The eyes of the Mexican girl flashed at his words, and she said quickly.

"Your prisoner, Captain Pierre Roscaro?"

"You are mistaken, senor, this gentleman is my escort."

"I am sorry, cousin, but I must do my duty."

"You consider it your duty to capture this gentleman, because you have sixty lanceros at your back."

"Would you be as brave were you alone, senor?"

The Mexican's face flushed with anger, while he replied:

"Fortune favors me in having my men with me at this time."

"I accept the situation, senorita, so kindly say no more in my behalf," Hugh Davis remarked.

"I will say just this, and Captain Roscaro can act as he deems best after hearing my words."

"He is my kinsman, a welcome guest in my father's home; but he has the power to let you go free, Senor Davis, and if he refuses, he shall never again cross the threshold of Varona Hacienda, never again dare to speak to me."

"What do you say, Senor Captain?"

That Pierre Roscaro was deeply moved by her words his face showed; but he tried to treat them lightly.

He felt that he was beaten, and he wished to retreat as best he could from his position, and so said:

"Under such a threat, sweet cousin, I can only reply that Lieutenant Davis is at liberty to return to his camp."

"I thank you, Cousin Pierre, and am glad to see you regard my friendship so highly."

"Senor Davis, again let me thank you and bid you *adios*."

She held out her hand as she spoke and Hugh Davis grasped it, while he said earnestly:

"I have much to thank you for also, senorita."

"Senor Captain Roscaro, I hope when next we meet, you will have no bar to your duty between us."

Raising his hat Hugh Davis wheeled his horse on the back trail, while he heard Isbel Varona call out:

"Come, Cousin Pierre, you must escort me home."

"She understands the fellow, for she saw, as I did, that he meant to follow me," muttered the young officer, as he urged his horse into a canter on his way back to camp, and in his mind kept running the words:

"That man is my rival from this day."

CHAPTER XV.

THE BROKEN ENGAGEMENT.

THE Padre Palma was buried in the monastery, where the members of his order were laid to rest, and returning to the Carlos Hacienda, Senor Varona obtained a permit from the colonel to leave the American lines and go back to his own home.

The colonel sent for him, and gave him the permit, at the same time remarking:

"I suppose it is useless for me to suggest, Senor Varona, that you will speak of nothing which you have had a chance to observe in our lines."

"Certainly I could do no such thing, Senor Colonel," was the reply, and the Mexican was then told that his enemy, Nevada the peon, had been shot to death the evening before.

Mounting his horse Senor Varona was escorted past the American outposts by Hugh

Davis, who had returned from his scout, and who made known to him the fact of his having met Isbel, and their meeting together Captain Roscaro.

"Pierre is a wicked hater, senor, and it is a wonder that he allowed you to go free, as he believes in the harshest measures toward Americans."

"I was pursued by some of his cavalry, senor, but the fleetness of my horse enabled me to escape from them."

"Do you not leave me here?"

"No, senor, I shall accompany you beyond the pass, as then you will be in no danger," and Hugh Davis had in mind the band of Don Cantrella, who he knew would be only too glad to capture the old Mexican and fleece him for a large ransom.

As they rode on and were suddenly surrounded by a party of bandits, it showed the wisdom of the young American's warning.

"Respect the badge!" he called out in a loud voice, raising the sword-pin in his hand.

Mounted upon his white horse, given him by the chief, and dressed in a fatigue uniform as he was, Hugh Davis had not been recognized by the outlaws.

But now, to the amazement of the Mexican, they quickly fell back into their hiding-places, and the two horsemen passed on.

"Here, senor, I will leave you, as you will be in no more danger," said the lieutenant, as they approached the pass where Captain Roscaro had pounced down upon him when he was with Isbel.

"Senor, I owe to you my life, yes more, for I would not only have died, but it would have been an ignominious death. Thanks are of little worth; but believe me, foes though we are in name, let us be friends in heart, and if ever you care to come to my home, believe me your welcome shall be a warm one."

"*Adios*, senor, *adios*, and the Virgin preserve you from harm!"

So saying the Mexican rode on his way homeward, deeply impressed by the scenes of the past few days. He had loved his twin brother, Palma, most dearly, and his unexpected death had been a great blow to him.

By the terms of the inheritance they possessed, his brother's property now went to him; but if he died, and Isbel, the Church would inherit all.

When his brother had become a priest, he had left in Senor Varona's hands his entire wealth to manage, and so well had the property been managed, both for Padre Palma and himself, that he was one of the richest men in Mexico, and Isbel would be the wealthiest heiress.

When Senor Varona rode up to the piazza of his hacienda, he found there Isbel waiting to welcome him, for, she had seen his approach from her room window.

"I am so glad to see you back, dear father, and I feel for you in your sorrow for poor Uncle Palma," she said, feelingly.

"He is away from all care and sorrow, my child," and the senor then went on to tell of his crossing the American lines, and how he had been escorted as far as the pass by the young American, adding:

"And he told me, Isbel, of his meeting you yesterday in the valley, and your coming upon your cousin, Pierre, and his lanceros."

"Yes, father."

"But what were you doing yesterday, alone, and so far away from the hacienda, my child?"

"Father, I have a secret to confess to you, and you will then understand why I did not attend Uncle Palma's burial, why I asked for your treasure key, and also what I was doing in the valley yesterday."

Then, to the amazement of her father, Isbel told of her riding Blackbird to death, in her wild run to the American camp, of the bandit chief giving her his splendid blood-bay steed, and why she had gone to the valley to meet the outlaw.

She also told of her midnight trip to the vault, the meeting there of Rio Grande Jose, who supposed she was a ghost, and then how Hugh Davis, from his hiding place over the Mustang Spring, had heard all that had passed between Don Cantrella and herself.

The attack of the bandits upon them, the coming of their chief, the giving of the little

gold emblems of safety, all were made known to the astonished Mexican, who could then understand why the American officer had been allowed to pass through with him unharmed.

"And now, father," continued Isbel, "Cousin Pierre did not intend to let Lieutenant Davis go free, until I told him he should never cross the threshold of Varona Hacienda again.

"He then meant to follow us after the American and capture him, if he could, but I asked him to serve as my escort, and he was forced to do so; but he said something to one of his officers in a low tone and half a dozen men dropped back, after we started, and I believe it was to try and capture the lieutenant."

"That was it, and I am surprised at Pierre."

"I am not, for he has not the high sense of honor that others of his blood have."

"I fear not; but you will reform him, my child, when you are his wife."

"Father!"

"Well?"

"I shall never marry him."

The Mexican started.

"I mean it."

"You will not marry your cousin?"

"No."

"Why, child, you are mad."

"No, I am sensible."

"What can you mean?"

"I mean that it has been an understood thing that I should marry Cousin Pierre Roscaro, and I have acquiesced in it, for I did not love any one; but now I know that I can never love Pierre Roscaro, and so I shall not marry him."

"Oh, Isbel!"

"I am firm, father, and he is coming here to-night, he told me, to have a day set for our marriage, and I shall then make known my decision."

Senor Varona begged, and commanded; but to no purpose, for Isbel remained firm, and at last he retired to his room with the remark:

"I gave my pledge to Pierre, and so have urged it, but after all I am glad of her decision to cast him off, for he is not worthy of her."

"But what on earth has changed her mind so suddenly?"

"Ah! I have it! it is that handsome American."

The senor was right in this surmise, for it was indeed Hugh Davis that had come between Isbel Varona and the man she had expected to marry.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE THREAT.

It was a stormy scene at Hacienda Varona, when Captain Pierre Roscaro called to have a day set for his marriage with his beautiful Cousin Isbel.

Captain Roscaro was a second cousin to Isbel, and much older, for he was a man of twenty-six where she was but seventeen.

He had inherited a fortune and had rapidly squandered it, excepting an income which he could not spend the principal of.

Besides this he had his pay as a captain of lanceros, and a small ranch which paid him a small stipend yearly.

He was a dashing officer, and as expert with cards as he was with a pistol, sword and lance, and many of his superior officers he kept in debt to him for money lost in gambling, and thus he held considerable power over them.

He had looked upon it as a foregone conclusion that Isbel was to be his wife, and as she was known to be an heiress to vast wealth, and their engagement was known to all, the captain's credit was unlimited.

Hating Americans with a venom that was merciless, he never allowed an opportunity to pass to strike them a blow, and his courage had quickly promoted him from a junior lieutenant to a captain commanding a battalion of lanceros.

The fact that Hugh Davis saved his cousin, Senor Varona, from death, did not really please the captain, for with the Padre Palma dead, and then his brother, Isbel would have possessed all of the property, and, as her nearest relative and intended husband, he would have it all his own way.

When he came hacienda, to set a day for

his marriage, the Mexican officer appeared very happy, which was explained by the fact that he had just been appointed to a majority, for gallant service in the field of battle.

The major, as now he was, received the congratulations of the father and daughter, and then, said:

"I hoped to have been a colonel, Isbel, before I asked you to be my wife, but I cannot wait so long, as any day I may be killed in this accursed war."

Then a bombshell bursting in the room, would not have surprised the Mexican major more, nor frightened him so much, as did Isbel's reply:

"I have decided, Cousin Pierre, not to marry you."

In vain was it that he stormed, then commanded, then pleaded.

She was firm, and her father left it all to her to decide, for he saw that Isbel clearly held the whip hand.

As for Pierre Roscaro he was almost wild.

His debts rose up before him like an avalanche, threatening his destruction, for if it became known that he was not to marry his rich cousin he would be swamped, he feared.

He begged her to put off her decision for six months, a year, but all to no avail; she remained firm.

Then it stole over him that there was a reason for this; and that reason presented itself in the young American lieutenant.

So out came the words:

"You love that infamous Gringo lieutenant."

"Do I?"

"You do!"

"Granted?"

"You shall never marry him."

"I certainly shall not unless he asks me."

"He will never ask you."

"Perhaps not."

"I know not."

"Well, you may be right," was the provoking response.

"I will kill him!" he hissed.

"So far the war has proved that three Mexicans fall to one American."

"Ha! you deride your own countrymen."

"Oh, no! but I think they should beat back a foe from their own territory."

"There is one that I shall dig a grave for here, and you will see if I do not keep my word, for no man who crosses my path in love and war shall live to triumph over me."

With this threat the young Mexican major left the room, and in spite of Senor Varona's entreaties to remain, mounted his horse, and dashed away in the darkness.

As for Isbel, the threat of her cousin against Hugh Davis caused a pang of dread to seize upon her heart, and going to her room she said earnestly:

"I will do all in my power to save him by placing him upon his guard."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BATTLE OF THE RIVALS.

The day following the irate departure of Major Roscaro from the Varona Hacienda, a soldier came to the quarters of Hugh Davis, and said that a man was at the outpost, and wished to see him.

The lieutenant mounted his horse and rode there at once.

He found that a horseman had approached the sentinel under flag of truce, and upon his business being demanded, said that he wanted to see Lieutenant Davis.

It was Tonio, the head herdsman of the Varona Ranch, and he saluted the lieutenant politely as he advanced, while he asked:

"Is this the Senor Lieutenant Davis?"

"I am, senor."

"I bear a letter for you, senor."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, senor, it is here."

He handed over a letter as he spoke.

It was addressed in a feminine hand and was sealed.

The face of the young officer flushed as he asked, for something better to say:

"From whence does this letter come, senor?"

"The Senorita Varona, senor."

The lieutenant blushed like a school-boy and hastily broke the seal.

It read as follows:

"VARONA HACIENDA,
Saturday.

"SEÑOR LIEUTENANT:—

"My cousin, Major Roscaro, whom you met, has taken a violent dislike to you, and has vowed to end your life.

"I know that he is one to carry out his intentions, and I beg that you do not go out alone from your camp, nor attempt to come to the hacienda as you promised.

"Heed my warning, for Pierre Roscaro is merciless.

"Your friend,

"ISBEL VARONA."

So highly did the lieutenant prize this little letter from Isbel, that he determined to write her one in response, hoping that she would also prize his.

So he bade Tonio await his return, and going to camp indited a few lines which had a double meaning, which he hoped she would see.

It was the language of love delicately veiled.

He thanked her, and said that he would heed her warning, yet would risk any danger to again see her.

And Tonio went back the better off by several golden American eagles, than he was when he came.

Several days after to his delight, Hugh Davis received his captaincy, and was appointed to a special command of a company of scouts.

The first duty which Captain Davis entered upon was to start out with his company in advance of the army, which intended to make a forward movement, having received long waited for supplies and reinforcements.

Down the valley they rode, seventy strong, and at their head rode the gallant young captain, anxious to meet the enemy and prove himself worthy of his promotion.

As they reared the Mustang Spring a horseman suddenly appeared before them.

Instantly the command came to a halt, while Hugh Davis advanced alone, for the horseman held a white flag above his head.

At the first glance Captain Davis had recognized the bandit chief, and as he drew near him, the outlaw called out:

"Well, senor, this is a mission of peace to you, for I come to warn you that there is danger in your path."

"My dear Kenton, you are a noble fellow, and most deeply do I regret that you have been driven to become what you now are."

"But tell me, what danger lies in my path?"

"A squadron of two hundred lanceros are lying in ambush at the pass for you."

"Ah! and that is a good place for an ambush, as I have cause to remember."

"But I thank you for your warning."

"You can flank the pass, senor, by turning off here and going through a gap five miles away."

"This will bring you in the rear of the lanceros, where their horses are, which you can capture and be master of the situation."

"Their spy passed down the valley several hours ago, and informed Major Roscaro that you were coming, for the lanceros left their camp and at once went to the pass to lie in wait for you."

"Again, I thank you, Kenton."

"Do not mention it, sir, for I but do my duty to you."

"And the gap you speak of?"

"If you will let me go ahead I will leave a trail for you to follow, for I know you are a good scout and trailer."

"Where my trail ends you can prepare to attack the Mexicans, for I hardly think they will leave the pass before night."

Again thanking the outlaw chief, Davis saw him ride away, and when he had disappeared from sight, he beckoned to his men to approach.

As they rode up, and halted, he said:

Men, that was our unfortunate comrade, Hark Kenton, whom you remember, and he warns me of an ambush of two hundred Mexican lanceros in the pass below him.

"We will flank them, and to my thinking, though but seventy of us, we can win the fight."

And heading the way, following the trail left by the bandit chief, Davis went on toward the gap, passed through it, and found himself in the beautiful valley beyond.

Here and there in the distance he beheld several haciendas, and one he did not doubt was the home of Isbel Varona.

As he looked, he saw two persons suddenly draw near upon a distant hill.

One was a horseman, the other a horse-woman, and his glass, quickly turned upon them, told him who they were.

It was Senor Varona and his daughter.

A moment after, four horsemen rode up behind them and drew rein.

They were Mexican cowboys, and Hugh Davis recognized one of them as Tonio, the bearer of the note of Isbel to him.

The party had come to a halt, evidently surprised on coming over the hill-top to see the American troopers in the valley.

Captain Davis was just making up his mind to ride around and join them, when the notes of a bugle rung out clear and sharp, from the canyon, a quarter of a mile away.

The trail of the bandit chief was no longer visible, and Hugh Davis remembered his words, that when he lost his track, to prepare for battle with the lanceros.

The next minute there dashed into sight the squadron of Mexican horsemen.

They came with a rush, having evidently discovered that the army had gone through the gap and flanked their position, and Major Roscaro, who was at their head, was determined to overwhelm the Americans, whose numbers he knew.

The major caught sight of the party on the hill and recognized them, for he waved his sombrero in greeting.

Then he deployed into line and the Mexicans swept down upon the band of Americans.

Hugh Davis had quickly taken in the situation.

He saw that there was a ravine a couple of hundred feet in front of him, and that the nature of the ground was very rough after crossing it.

By a flank movement to the right he could get good ground, head off the ravine and catch the Mexicans upon their left flank, while he would be in a fair way to reach the pass, and thus be able to retreat; should he have to do so.

The rifles of his men were long range, and he gave orders to fire only when he gave the word.

As the Mexicans neared the ravine, riding like the wind, the word was given.

The aim was true, and the result telling, for down went a number of horses and riders.

"Forward!" shouted Captain Davis, and, obliquing to the right, the Americans went at full speed around the head of the ravine, and, catching the Mexicans on their flank, while they were in disorder from the hot fire poured upon them, and hindered in their movements by the uneven ground, they went down upon them with inevitable fury.

Loud rung the wild yell of the troopers, and their revolvers, the terrible weapon which the Mexicans had learned so to dread, rattled forth lively music.

In vain was it that Major Roscaro tried to hold his men.

They were demoralized by their heavy losses, and the terrible revolvers spread panic in their ranks.

They outnumbered the Americans three to one, but the charge of their foes they could not withstand, their ranks broke, and, bearing their chagrined and brave major in their midst, they fled the field, leaving one fourth their number dead and wounded behind them.

The Americans had no hospitals to be filled with Mexican wounded, no prisons for prisoners, and so they swept over the field and went at a gallop toward the pass, the young captain highly elated at having won a victory against great odds, in full view of Isbel Varona, who still remained upon the hill with her father and his herders.

And bitter, indeed, was Roscaro from the same cause, and, dashing up to the group on the hill, as he saw that the Americans had retreated, he uttered a savage vow that he would yet capture Hugh Davis.

"No better opportunity than you just had may ever again present itself, Cousin Pierre," was Isbel's quiet remark, and it but added fuel to the flame of the major's rage and hatred against his rival.

- CHAPTER XVIII.

FOR LOVE'S SAKE.

THE reader well knows the result of the war with Mexico, and how our gallant

soldiers, under Scott and Taylor, won fame and victory for the Stars and Stripes.

When our armies had conquered a peace with the Mexicans, and the brave soldiers started back to their homes, there was one daring young officer who did not return to the United States.

He had won distinction on many a field, and his daring had been the admiration of his commander and comrades; but he sheathed his sword, resigned his commission, and remained in the sunny land of Mexico.

He had done his duty as a soldier, and he now meant to win for a wife one of Mexico's fair daughters.

That young officer was Captain Hugh Davis, and, as a citizen, for he threw aside his uniform with his sword, he intended to start for the home of Isbel Varona and ask her to become his wife.

Several times after the battle between his men and the lanceros, under Major Roscaro, he had met the fair Isbel, and each time she had seemed to grow dearer to him, as he did to her.

He had not told her of his love, but he had said that he would come, when the war ended, to visit her, and to ask her a question which he hoped she would answer as he wished she might.

"Come and ask it."

"I will answer truthfully," had been her reply.

So, when peace had settled upon the land, Captain Davis, attired in the picturesque costume of a Mexican gentleman, set out on horseback for the Hacienda Varona.

He stopped for the night at a small village, and when he was seated at his supper he was surprised to see enter no less a person than Colonel Pierre Roscaro, for he had risen to that rank.

The Mexican officer's face was stern, and his eyes brightened as they fell upon the American.

Instantly he crossed over to where Hugh Davis sat and said:

"We meet again, Senor American?"

"Yes, Colonel Roscaro, and I am glad that it is not as foes," was the reply.

"You are mistaken, senor, for we can never be aught but foes."

"As you please, senor."

"It shall be as I please, sir, for I heard of your remaining in Mexico, after your accursed armies had left, and I know your purpose for so doing."

"Well, senor, if I pay my way, am I not entitled to remain in Mexico?" and Hugh Davis kept his temper, for he saw that the colonel had an officer friend with him, and knew that he was alone among foes, foes smarting under their defeat by the Americans.

"You can remain, senor, yes, and I am determined that your stay here shall be forever. In fact, Senor Americano, Mexico is to be your burial-place."

"Ah! you expect to assassinate me then?"

"I am no murderer, sir."

"Report had it with us that you were, and I so consider you, from the manner in which you made your men butcher our wounded prisoners who fell into your merciless hands."

"Hah! you dare to insult me?"

"You sought me to insult me, senor, and so I will simply say that you are a coward."

The words were very coolly uttered, and the Mexican's face blanched with rage.

"Enough, sir! I will send you my friend, and your life shall be the forfeit for your words."

"I have no friend in Mexico, senor, that I can call upon, so must ask you as a gentleman, to request one of your officers to serve me."

"Permit me to offer my services, senor, for I am an American."

The speaker wore a long black beard, and his hair hung in curls upon his shoulders.

Hugh Davis half started, but saw a glance of warning not to recognize him, and so said:

"I thank you, sir, and will accept your services as freely as you offer them."

"Your name, please?"

"My name is Henry Kenton, sir."

"And mine, Mr. Kenton, is Hugh Davis."

"Colonel Roscaro will name to you his second, and as we have an hour before night-

fall, we might as well arrange this affair at once."

It was soon arranged, between Kenton, whom the reader will recognize as Don Cantrella, and a captain of lanceros who accompanied Colonel Roscaro.

The meeting-place was half a mile away, the weapons were to be swords, and in case of their failure to kill, revolvers.

The principals, their seconds and a surgeon went at once to the field, and Colonel Roscaro and Hugh Davis, swords in hand, faced each other.

The Mexican was noted as a swordsman; but so quickly was he disarmed, that he did not comprehend how it was done.

Furious at his failure to kill, when he had expected to do so, Colonel Roscaro at once demanded a second trial with revolvers.

They were to stand thirty paces apart, step forward at the word, and, a second calling out the steps, were to begin to fire with seven, and continue to advance toward each other until both revolvers were emptied, or one, or both fell.

Hugh Davis was indifferently calm, and Colonel Roscaro in such a fury that he was nervous, and his second admonished him to keep calm, adding:

"That man may shoot as well as he fences."

"I shall kill him," savagely said the colonel, and his words were heard by all.

At the word they both stepped briskly forward, Don Cantrella having won the call, giving the commands.

As seven was called two pistols flashed together.

One man fell, the other remained standing.

As the surgeon sprung to the side of Colonel Roscaro, Hugh Davis said:

"I hope his wound is not fatal, for I aimed above his heart."

"It is a question, sir," was the reply of the surgeon, and Don Cantrella drew Hugh Davis away, saying:

"Get your traps at the inn, and go with me, for the feeling is very bitter against Americans, and you may be assassinated."

"Thank you; but where do you go?"

"Back to my mountain fastness, and you ride that way, as your destination is the Hacienda Varona."

"You know that?"

"Yes, for I know your secret; you love the senorita and she loves you."

"I dearly love her, but I am an outlaw and withdraw in your favor, wishing you both every joy."

"And will you still remain an outlaw?"

"Oh yes, to my death, for I have no country, no home, no hope!"

Reaching the inn, Hugh Davis got his things, sent a vehicle after the wounded officer, and rode away with the outlaw chief, who, having allowed his hair and beard to grow, looked little like the handsome young bandit-leader of a year before.

At the pass, which Hugh Davis remembered so well, they parted, the bandit to return to his men, and his outlawry, and the young soldier to keep on to the Varona Hacienda.

The welcome that he met, from both Senor Varona and Isbel gladdened his heart, and he told the story of the duel forced upon him, and added:

"I would like to know the result."

"Tonio shall go at once and find out all; but if he is dead my kinsman brought it upon himself," said the ranchero.

Tonio at once started on his errand, and the next night he returned with word that Colonel Roscaro was seriously but not fatally wounded.

Then Hugh Davis asked the question he had told Isbel he would ask, and her answer was:

"I love you, and I will be your wife!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A RIVAL'S TRIUMPH.

A NUMBER of years have passed away since Isbel Varona became the wife of Hugh Davis, the young American soldier, and the reader is asked to again visit Hacienda Varona.

One pleasant afternoon a beautiful woman sat upon the piazza of the hacienda, peering across the plains spread out before her for several miles, and seemingly intent upon watching for some one's coming.

She is not alone, for a young girl of ten years is seated near her, while a little boy of six is leaning upon his mother's knee.

They are both beautiful children, and strongly resemble their mother, whose face is saddened, as though with long suffering.

It is she who was Isabel Varona, now the Donna Davis.

Suddenly her eyes fall upon a horseman coming across the plain, and turning a glass upon him, she cried:

"It is good Tonio, and he rides like the wind. Heaven grant he bring me good news of my husband, my poor children!"

"If it be bad news, mother?" asked the girl, leaving her seat and coming to her mother's side.

"Ah, my child, I dread it. Your grandfather is dead, and with all the wealth that is mine, I am wretched, for that wicked Roscaro has never ceased to persecute me.

"He has dogged my noble husband's steps by day and night, year after year, and this charge now of conspiracy against your father is, I believe, his work.

"I feel as though I could give up wealth and home and fly to the wilderness to dwell, where that venomous man, Pierre Roscaro, would no longer follow me and mine."

She had spoken aloud, as though to herself, rather than to her daughter; but both the children had heard every word, and the little boy said firmly:

"Some day, mother, I will kill that bad man, when I grow up."

A short while more and the horseman dashed into the plaza.

He dismounted, and as he approached the piazza, his step was slow, his head was bowed.

"Speak, Antonio! speak! What of my husband?" cried the woman, springing to her feet.

"Alas, senora, it is all over."

"Do you mean that my husband has been found guilty of conspiracy?" asked Isabel with strange calmness.

"The tribunal found him guilty, senora."

"And what the punishment?"

"Death!"

"An when is he to be executed?" asked the woman in the same strangely calm tone.

"He has been executed, senora."

One long, ringing cry of anguish, and Isabel, the stricken wife, fell her length upon the piazza.

In loud tones Tonio called for Fanita, who had become his wife, and she was borne into the hacienda and the physician sent for.

Three months after, two horsemen approached the Varona Hacienda. One was in civilian attire, the other in the uniform of a colonel of lanceros.

"This is the place, Caballos," said the colonel.

"And you soon will know your fate, Colonel Roscaro."

"Yes."

"If she refuses to believe you?"

"She must believe me, Caballos, and you are to prove that I did all in my power to save her husband."

"Oh, I can prove any lie, Roscaro; but if she refuses to become your wife?"

"Then I am ruined."

"It looks so."

"And you are, too."

"I fear we are both in the same boat, colonel."

"We are, and I will have to fly, for I am fearfully in debt, and, but for the belief that I was to marry my cousin, I would have been ruined a month ago."

"She must marry me, Caballos, if it is a forced marriage."

"Yes."

"Well, here we are; but how gloomy the place looks— Ah! there is a man."

The one referred to awaited the coming of the two horsemen, and Colonel Roscaro recognized the manager of the ranch.

"Ah, Pedro, how are you?"

"And my cousin, I hope, is well?"

"The donna is not here, Senor Colonel."

"Not here?"

"No, senor."

"Where is she?"

"*Quien sabe, senor,*" and the man shrugged his shoulders.

"What do you mean?"

"She left her nearly three months ago."

"Where did she go?"

"She would not tell."

"Speak, man, and tell me what you mean!"

"After the senor's death, she lay for days, all of us expecting her to die."

"Then Tonio, who had been away for some time returned, and they had a long talk together."

"Two nights after the senora, her children, Fanita and Tonio departed on horseback, and carried with them a number of pack-mules, laden with baggage."

"She told me to turn the revenues of the ranch into the bank in her name, and where she went no one knows, and she said she would not be heard of again until her son was of age and could avenge his father."

"That is all that I can tell you, senor."

"Did she take her gold with her?"

"What treasure she had she sent to the bank, and yet kept gold enough to pay her way."

"I will overlook the house, Pedro, and—"

"Senor, I have orders to kill you if you attempt to cross the threshold, and before her departure the senora had me created an officer of the law for that purpose, so I warn you off, for I have my herders near."

With an oath Colonel Roscaro turned away, followed with alacrity by his companion, Caballos.

"We are ruined!" groaned the officer.

"Yes, and what is to be done, senor?"

"I will resign my commission and turn bandit, to get money enough to hunt the earth over, to find that woman and her children."

"Mark my words, Caballos, I will yet have my revenge and get that fortune for all my own, for, if she will not marry me, her daughter shall, and the boy's death and his mother's will give me all."

"Do you see?"

"I see, senor, but has not the Church a claim on the property?"

"Should the woman die, and her children die, yes, it goes to the Church."

"But, should the woman and the boy die, and the daughter marry, then all is hers, and her husband's, of course. It is worth working for, Caballos."

"It is indeed, senor, and I will cling to you until the end," was the earnest reply of Caballos.

CHAPTER XX.

"THE CONNECTING LINK."

SOME twelve years after the vow of Pierre Roscaro, to hunt down Isabel and her children, a young man was seated in a handsome room in a New York hotel.

He was strikingly handsome in person, some thirty years of age, tall, well-formed, and with a figure that denoted strength and activity above the average.

His bronzed face did not indicate the city man, though he was richly attired and had the free-and-easy manner of one who had mingled much with the world.

An open letter was in his hand, and having read it he soliloquized as follows:

"Now, God bless that old uncle of mine; he has left me the old homestead in Tennessee, where my happy boyhood was passed, and which he bought in when father failed, to keep it in the family. The estate brings in a handsome living, and will come in well, as I have about used up the thirty thousand old Aunt Phoebe left me to be educated abroad, and see the world on."

"Well, I have seen the world, I think, and extracted out of it all the pleasure I could. I have hunted lions in Africa, elephants and tigers in India, enjoyed gay life in the capitals of Europe, and dwelt years on our Western plains, while, best of all, I have dodged designing mammas, and have never yet seen the girl I would marry."

"I cannot go to the old homestead to live, for father died there by his own hand, mother broke her heart mourning for him, and only sad remembrances cling about the place."

"I'll go by, however, put a good agent in charge—one who will bank my money in my name and not his own—and then I'll take a run down into Texas and Mexico for a real devil-I-care tramp over the prairies and into the Comanche country for a little excitement. Yes, I'll start as soon as I can get off."

"I will need a new repeating rifle, revolvers, and, in fact, a complete outfit, and I'll purchase them to-morrow."

"When I get tired of my roving life, I'll return to the old homestead, on the shady side of life, and settle down as an old bachelor, as Uncle Hart did."

"But who will I leave my money to, for I never intend to marry?"

"I do not know."

"Ah! I'll found an asylum for old bachelors, calling it 'Bachelors' Happy Home: Founded by Hart Hazel, a bachelor."

"Yes that is what I will do."

"But now to get an outfit and start for the old homestead, to look over my inheritance, and then, Hart Hazel, you are off for Texas and Mexico."

CHAPTER XXI.

AROUND THE CAMP-FIRE.

BRIGHTLY flashed up the ruddy blaze of a camp-fire, sending streams of light far out across the prairie, and reflecting back a sparkle from the keen eyes of a hungry pack of wolves gazing wistfully toward the scene, as if longing to revel in the refuse of the substantial supper just discussed by a party of bold and reckless prairiemen, idly seated around the cheerful warmth.

The duties of the night were over, the stock was securely staked out, and the five men who composed the party, were lazily drawing the smoker's dream of comfort through their pipe-stems, to quiet them for the dreamless slumber of those who have worked hard during the day.

The conversation going the rounds of the little circle seemed a little out of place for the wild prairie, and from men of their stamp, for it was not of wild adventure, of scenes of danger and death, as one would have expected from men of the border, for in the group were Mariposa Sam, Black Charlie, Burt Davis and Dingle, all well known along the frontier to both pale-face and red-skin.

The fifth man was Hart Hazel, the one who had inherited the old Tennessee homestead, and the only one of the five on the sunny side of forty-five.

He was a bronzed faced, eagle-eyed, straight-limbed, quick-motioned man, full of vitality.

He had traveled far in his time, and was at home alike in the parlor or on the prairie, at close quarters in the deadly strife, or at long range.

Though admired by all he was, especially the favorite of the fair-sex, and yet he called himself a woman-hater—was it because some fair-eyed creature had hit him hard in years gone by?

When the reader is led up to the prairie camp-fire Hart Hazel is speaking.

"No, boys, the woman that I shall marry is not yet born."

"Strikes me that puts the wedding off a thundering long while!" exclaimed Mariposa Sam, and followed up the jest by a suggestion that perhaps a granddaughter he had, who was just cutting her teeth might suit him.

"Do you know what kind of a girl you want, yourself?" asked Black Charlie, as he was called on the border, but whose real name was Fred Haines; then he continued:

"My old woman, back in St. Louis, is a prime article, I can tell you; but she's nothing like the girl I dreamed of a year before I saw her. It's enough to make a monkey grin to see how youngsters change their minds. Why, I used to think of a delicate little chick, only wanting wings to make her an angel, and my wife is a solid two hundred pounder—how's that, Hart?"

"Keep on with your jests, but I mean what I say. I have roved all over the world, yet the face that would draw me forever, through water and fire I have never yet seen. I have dreamed of it, perhaps, yes; but as I have dreamed the face, it nowhere exists."

"Come, now, Hazel, tell us your dream," cried Mariposa Sam.

For a moment Hazel looked thoughtfully into the little bed of coals that lay near him warm and glowing. He turned his head away, then as suddenly brought his glance back again upon the fire, as though he saw therein something which had caught his attention.

"Wait a moment, until I refill my pipe;

then I may give you a word-picture of my ideal. It seems to me that I see her face just now."

"Rather a hot place to look for her, my boy. I hope it's not prophetic," said Charlie, but the rest frowned as though the poor joke was distasteful, and a dead silence followed.

Hart Hazel sat gazing into the coals, motionless and speechless. His eyes had a far-away look, and his tongue did not move. The rest looked curiously at him, and when, from some movement upon his part they expected him to go on with the description he had promised, he drew his blanket around him in an apparent fit of abstraction, and with a muttered excuse that was but half understood, walked apart from the rest a few paces, and threw himself heavily upon the ground. There, with his head resting upon a little mound, he closed his eyes as if for slumber.

Hazel's actions did not seem particularly displeasing to the rest. Perhaps they were accustomed to strange freaks upon his part. Only, from time to time, as they sat around the fire, they cast curious glances in his direction.

Gradually the conversation wandered away in a different channel, and before long the desultory talk concerning their journey, and the like, ended, silence coming down upon and around the encampment.

An hour or two passed by

Toward midnight the slumbers of Hart Hazel began to be of a disturbed nature. He rolled and turned nervously, his brow wore an expression of agony, his hands were tightly clinched, his limbs drawn up in a singularly distorted position, while great drops of perspiration stood upon his forehead. He groaned in his sleep, and seemed to be in an agony almost mortal.

He turned from his back to his side, straightened his limbs, stretched out his hands, and in a strange, cracked voice croaked out:

"Haste, haste, haste!"

Then in altered tone, clear and distinct, he exclaimed:

"I am coming!"

He sprung to his feet, and stood fully revealed in the glimmering light of the camp-fire; the pained look was gone from his features, and in its place was one of firm determination, as he stood half-bent, shading his brow with his hand, and peering out through the shade of cottonwood and willow, toward the open plain that lay beyond.

"Good heavens! can this have been only a dream?"

As thus he spoke, in some respects coming again to his senses, Burt Davis stood at his side, and placing his hand upon the young man's shoulder said, in a sympathetic tone:

"What's the trouble now, Hazel? Have you gone mad, or did you hear something suspicious? I thought I heard you moaning in your sleep and I came to awake you."

"Not mad, oh, no! And I've heard nothing while in my senses. But I've dreamed a dream—and such a dream! Here, sit down and listen. I must tell it to some one, and to who better than you, Burt, whom I know to be a true man?"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DREAM.

AWED by a strange light that shone in the eyes of the young man, Davis asked no questions, but allowed himself to sink down upon the ground by the side of Hart Hazel, and remained seated and regarding him with an attentive look, while, under a strange excitement that seemed hardly warranted by the circumstances, he poured forth his story.

"To-night, when we sat jesting by the camp-fire, I had a vision; nay, more, a revelation. The cloud of prejudice, or ignorance rolled back from before my eyes, and I saw, for the first time in my life, I believe, a possible ideal. I actually and truly saw the woman I could love—ay, the woman for whom I could die."

"You kept mighty still about her, then?"

"Yes, in that first moment of revelation, just when the fresh, sweet face, and soft brown eyes beamed on me for the first time out of the red coals of the camp fire, as though suddenly starting into distinctness from a mist, I felt it were sacrilege to drag her beauty before the gaze of others, and at

once rolled my blanket around me and threw myself down to dream of the vision.

"I was frightened almost at its vividness, and I wished to be alone to dwell upon it. Then I sunk back into the shadows of dream-land—to find it gone."

"Queer, my boy. I too had my thoughts at that same time. I too saw dimly hovering above the dancing sheets of flame a tiny form, a delicate face. I saw the golden hair and sweet brown eyes—but they belonged to a little child. Ah, that face!"

It was now the turn of Hazel to look in surprise at the weather-beaten face beside him. Had he been less excited himself, he might have been thrown off the current of his thoughts by the apparent emotion so suddenly manifested by Davis.

"I see you have some history or mystery of your own. Feel for me then, as I tell you more, although it's only a dream."

"Ah, life is full of dreams—would that there were no awakenings," hoarsely whispered Davis. "I awoke from a dream once, and was mad. With a word, almost, without an effort on your part, you have called back the memory of that madness. It lasted longer than I care now to reckon. Pray Heaven yours may end more quickly."

As he spoke, Burt Davis gazed with a strange stare into the eyes of the young man.

Hazel came back to consciousness, as he saw the effect produced upon his companion. The cloud rolled away from his eyes, and his pulse beat slower and more regularly. In place of excitement came a steady calm.

"I see I have unwittingly touched chords that I would not have suspected had any existence. Your hand, Davis; but remember that it means my story first and a favor afterwards. I have had my mad hour; yet it has given me a fortune. I am owner now of a plantation."

"How young you are, how innocent. Are you alone, of all mankind, enriched with such a dowry from fate? Phantom! Alas! In every heart there dwells a skeleton specter, to rattle its bones when the music around is gayest. But your dream, Hazel, your dream!"

"My dream—oh, yes. It is time that I recall it lest it should fade. It has enthralled me, a willing captive, and I would not have its memory vanish. I fell asleep, vainly striving to bring back to my mind the face that I had, for an instant, so clearly seen. Then after some time, I saw the face again. It was on the verge of a wide plain, just when it melted away into a dense forest, that I came back to consciousness. I rode wearily along, my horse stumbled forward with drooping head and trembling limbs. I was weary and sore and dying of hunger and thirst it seemed. The trail before me was one I followed from instinct, and I had not the strength to note the signs that would have told me who made it."

"Suddenly my eye caught and comprehended something before me. Racked and tired as I was by my journey, which seemed to have been interminable in length, a new life and vigor appeared mysteriously to be infused into my frame. I halted my horse and looked at the trail before me with the deepest interest. At one side pressed in the sand, which just then seemed to retain them with surprising tenacity, I saw footprints that caused a thrill to dart through my frame. Slender, delicate, shapely; they were the marks made by a woman's foot, a tiny foot, cased in a close fitting moccasin."

"The sight seemed to come like a revelation. The interpretation of my journey lay before me: through the desert I was pressing, to follow that footstep. I felt within me stirring recollection, mad energy, wild determination: it awoke the slumbering resolves of energy that nature had granted me. I was trailing that face, that fairy, that phantom, which first appeared to me in the light of our camp-fire this night."

"Just at the edge of the forest I saw it!"

"For a moment I saw the fair-haired, blue-eyed girl with an inviting smile on her face gazing at me. Then she turned to flee, and as she did so my overtaken steed stumbled and fell forward heavily."

"I leaped quickly to my feet; but the vision was gone!"

"I rushed forward, calling her name. I do not know what that name was, but I re-

member the mournful echoes of it that rung through the lonely woods. I ceased to listen and then came back a single answering scream; then all was silent."

"The tiny footprints were before me and I followed on, guided by their delicately distinct marks. Ahead the silence was again broken; I heard the barks and yells of the gaunt red buffalo wolf, and heard the woman's scream repeated. From the forest, upon either side, I saw the broad footmarks of the wolves as they had emerged from the thickly standing trees and cast themselves upon the trail of the flying woman. Was she fleeing? The brutes upon her trail had bounded along as though under full speed; if they once deemed that she fled from them what hope would there be for her?"

"As I pushed on with every nerve strung, every muscle doing duty to the utmost I heard a strange voice. Where it was from I knew not. Its weird, harsh tones seemed to be floating in the air, and it croaked:

"Haste, haste!"

"I will haste! I shouted, while, as if in response, I heard, still further beyond, from the hidden depths of the forest a mingling of howl and yell."

"Haste, haste! Save her, save her!"

"I will save her—I am coming! I flung back in response to the voice and again I made the forest resound with the name."

"Suddenly there opened before me a little glade, an opening in the woods, round and bare. Upon the further side, just replunging into the dense timber, I saw the woman. Close behind her, and upon right and left, ran a pack of gaunt, grim wolves."

"I strained every nerve, shouted, cursed at the cowardly brutes, and would have called them back to me. I saw the leader spring at the girl, and, halting, I threw my still grasped rifle to my shoulder, to try the awful risk of the quick, long shot."

"Then I awoke!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

SWUNG LOOSE.

THE melodramatic recitation ceased, and Hazel, once more deeply excited at the vision recalled by his tale, looked with gleaming eyes upon the face of Burt Davis, and appeared to await his response. Yet the abrupt way in which he wound up his story hardly seemed to call for any extended remark. Either he trusted to the native wit of the old plainsman, or he had much more to say.

"And you are going?"

Thus tersely inquired the man, his face aglow with strange enthusiasm.

"To the death, if need be, I shall follow the trail. Have I not said, 'I am coming?' Sleeping or waking, the word of Hart Hazel, once pledged, is passed irrevocably. Are you with me?"

Davis drew his hand slowly across his eyes; a thoughtful look corrugated his brows, and when he answered his voice had a refined, yet a dreamy tone, apparently foreign to one who, like the speaker, was a *voyageur* to the heart's core.

"With you—yes. Your dream is mine, too, though, alas, mine can have no reality."

"Recall the scenery to your mind, picture to me all the outlines of desert, forest and glade; perhaps I may yet recognize the spot as one which my feet have visited in my many wanderings. If not, there are Maraposa Sam and Eph Dingle. To them, in all this land, there is scarcely a canyon, stream, or prairie they have not visited. Perhaps they might tell us which way to turn our steps."

"The way to turn our course is thitherward," said Hazel, pointing with his finger. "Straight out through the scattering trees, across yonder butte, and then on that line extended, straight as the crow flies. It was just in that direction I faced when I sprung to my feet. As the dream faded away the butte, with its leafy crown arose; of the land that lays beyond there I know nothing, but it is the ground over which we are to journey."

"I have skirted the edge of the desert that lies in that direction, at the distance of a two days' march, but what may be still further on, I know not, nor have I ever heard."

"We will learn. We will brave its fastnesses, we will risk its dangers. To-morrow, with the sunlight, we will seek the phantom,

we will swing loose upon the trail of the dream!"

"We will. But what of the train, meanwhile?"

"The train must take care of itself. That is, we two will leave it. I shall hold myself responsible for all loss, and if they cannot take it through in safety, I doubt, even if we remained with it, our hands and heads would be sufficient additional force to secure its safety."

"We are to start at sunrise. Well, then, we had better seek what rest we can gain to-night yet. Upon that desert we may have to journey night and day. Go back to your slumbers, and let them be dreamless. At a more convenient season I will tell you something of my past life, something of *my* dream, which may show you why it is that, at a moment's warning, I am ready to turn aside from what may be the path of duty, and follow the footsteps of a man I have known but a few weeks."

"You are mistaken; it is the path of duty that you are about to pursue; and you shall not follow, you shall lead. Upon you I count for aid, for knowledge; with your assistance I shall succeed."

"In what?"

"Heaven alone can tell. It is enough that I have promised. Yes. I am coming!"

The two men then separated, each retiring to his own couch, each soon falling into a sleep more or less refreshing.

At daybreak the camp was astir. Great was the surprise of Mariposa Sam when Burt Davis placed in his hands the command of the three wagons that composed the train, with the orders which had been given him on starting from St. Louis from Santa Fe. He looked curiously at Burt Davis, when questioned concerning the nature of the desert beyond, and shook his head negatively. Its depths had never been explored by him.

At the same time the command was accepted unhesitatingly and unquestioningly, and Sam saw the two men mount their horses and ride away without comment. As the sun fairly rose and cast its bright rays across the plain, Hazel and his companion were already skirting the timber-crowned butte. A few moments later and they were lost from the sight of their late comrades.

They had swung loose to trail a dream.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"HASTE, HASTE, HASTE!"

FIVE days on the trail.

On either hand stretched the great wide desert, lapping around in the rear until river and tree-crowned butte from whence they started faded into the dark-blue streak of the horizon.

In front, toward the close of the sixth day, there arose, so suddenly that to the weary wanderer, it seemed a phantom, or a mirage, an unexpected oasis, that flourished in gorgeous greenness in the very midst of the thirsty desert.

Until the very moment when they stood upon the brink of the depression which contained it, the sight of Hazel and his friend had entirely over-shot it, and rested on the barren sands beyond.

"Good heavens! can this be a reality?" exclaimed Hazel, at the unexpected sight that lay before them.

"If it's a painted lie, it looks natural enough to lead us straight down to death. If it's not water and feed, we are lost men. See, old Barney scents the fresh leaves and the cool water. Steady, boy, there may be red-skins there."

"Red-skins or not—here goes!" shouted Hazel, and without further effort to check the progress of his steed, he started down into the little valley upon a run, Davis following close behind.

They entered the little charmed circle of emerald, they crossed the elastic, lovely carpet of turf, and in a moment more horses and men were slaking their thirst from a little spring which, arising from the sand, filled a little reservoir to overflowing, and after diffusing moisture around for a few rods, lost itself again in the sands of the desert that lay below.

"Just in the nick of time," said Hazel, after he had quaffed a long draught of the priceless fluid, which they had so desperately needed. "Another day would have finished

us and our search together. What strange good fortune this is. I begin to feel re-inspired; my wavering faith is revived. We are on the right trail, and will yet be successful."

"Better fortune than a gold-mine. Fling off your saddle and bridle as quickly as you can, and we'll let the poor beasts enjoy what they hardly expected to reach to-night."

The hint was not lost upon Hart, who roused himself from his lassitude and stripped off the trappings of his animal and turned the jaded creature loose to join Burt's steed, Barney, who was already cropping the short, juicy grass beneath his feet. Then the young man flung himself down at the foot of a short-stemmed, scrawny little cotton-wood, which in some way had been planted there.

"I'm too nigh done out to eat," said Davis, as he drew out his pipe and proceeded to light it. "We'll sit still and rest a bit till we can find room to drink again. It's only when one finds it scarce that he cares for water as he ought to."

"That's so, Davis. And yet we should have searched for traces of any visitors who may have been near this place lately. By morning the horses will have tramped them out of all recognition."

"In the morning we can find any tracks on the sand as well as here."

"Provided some one on the sands *now* does not find us before that morning comes."

"No danger of that. I took in the whole place at a glance as I came up. You can be sure that no living thing visits this spot, unless by chance, and I will stand responsible for all dangers."

The darkness was rapidly deepening during this conversation. The little dingle lay in shadow which the feeble starlight did not illumine, and the moon had not yet arisen. Tired and worn, Hazel did not care to argue the question of prudence; indeed, he scarcely cared to carry into execution his own suggestion. When men have just come through some heavy strain or deadly danger, is the time that vigilance relaxes, or the body goes but unwillingly to any necessary task.

When the two had partaken of such provisions as they had with them, and had given a hasty look through the few scrubby bushes that grew around, they cast themselves once more beneath the little cottonwood and resigned themselves to slumber.

The two horses browsed around for a time and made a hearty meal of grass and tender leaflets. Then they also were silent. Through all the little camp nothing could be heard but the gentle rustling of the night wind, and the calm, regular breathing of the sleepers.

Some hours passed by, and then the rest of both of the men was disturbed by some unwonted sound. Burt rolled and turned, Hazel moved as if something was oppressing him. After a time he opened his eyes and lay staring straight upward with that fixed, glassy look which a sleeper, half-awakened, will sometimes assume.

Suddenly there came rolling through the camp the sound of a hoarse voice that shouted:

"Ahoy, there! ahoy! Ship ahoy!"

There was no mistaking the sound. It was no fragment of a dream. It was an actuality; a real, living sound that on the startled air of night sounded loud enough to wake the dead.

With a bound Hazel was on his feet, gazing around him, and immediately fell back a pace or two, and placed his hand upon the lock of his Henry rifle he had seized on rising.

Three low, distinct warning growls fell upon his ear, and the moonlight, now streaming straight and full into the dingle, revealed the long, gaunt bodies of three red, buffalo wolves, that stood in regular line not a dozen paces off, eying the two men with a hungry, curious stare.

Hazel was in doubt; he looked at the wolves as at an apparition. Had they shouted ahoy! or was he on haunted ground? He thought to test their mortality, but just at the instant that he threw his rifle to his shoulder he heard footsteps beyond the animals, and the sweep and swirl of some one running lightly through the bushes.

As though impelled by one impulse of thought the three heads before him gave a simultaneous movement. Six wolfish eyes

looked to their rear for a moment; then the animals turned and bounded away.

Hart Hazel caught sight of a form flitting away from the little oasis. With a smooth, gliding motion, it ascended the side of the valley, never pausing, never looking backward.

At this sight the young man changed the direction of the muzzle of his weapon. As best he could he drew a bead upon the flying figure and pulled the trigger. As he did so the hand of Burt Davis struck the piece upward and the shot hurtled harmlessly beyond the fugitive. Almost at the same moment he heard a strange noise in the air overhead that caused him to give a rapid, upward glance.

"Haste, haste, save her, save her!" croaked a strange voice.

Again Hazel's eye fell upon the fugitive. The wolves were upon the track of the flying person. Throwing back short cries as they ran, they drew nearer and nearer to the dark figure, which had almost reached the visible crest of the ascent. A few moments would end the chase.

Just then the strange intruder gave utterance to a sharp, shrill whistle which was answered by the neigh of a horse, and a mustang dashed into sight from behind the concealing crest of the rising land. Riderless and uncontrolled, the mustang dashed down, wheeled, and as the foremost of the wolf-herd gained a springing distance, ranged itself beside the fugitive who, still at full speed, laying one hand upon the horse, lightly sprung upon its back.

Mustang and rider swept out of sight, but back from the desert was flung the sound of hoof-beats, ringing, now and then, clear above the angry snarl and cry of the pursuing wolves, while above Hart Hazel's head the strange voice croaked again:

"Haste! haste! save her! save her!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SECRET MISSION.

"A HUNDRED dollars to the man who can tell me what I would know about the Comanche country!"

The speaker uttered the words in a room crowded with wild-looking bordermen.

It was in a tavern in a town on the Rio Grande, and the man who had entered the room was a stranger to all present.

He was a man of powerful physique, a dark, foreign-looking face, and a manner that was refined, in strange contrast to the uncouth crowd about him, which boasted some of the wildest and worst characters in Texas.

Where a chorus of voices might be expected to cry out, at an offer so tempting, a silence followed, and all eyes turned upon the one who wished to know about the Comanche country.

He met their gaze calmly, and then asked: "Does no one here know the country about the Devil's Canyon?"

"Where is Black Larry?" cried a voice.

All looked about them, and just then a man came into the saloon, and in chorus rung out:

"There's Black Larry now!"

The man so named dropped his hand upon a revolver, and facing the crowd said grimly:

"Waal, who is it says shoot, pards?"

He was a thorough type of a borderman, and he had not wholly expected trouble.

"It's no shoot, Larry, but a pilgrim here wants a man as knows the Comanche country, and all up about the Devil's Canyon, and we said as you was the one as did."

"I knows it all, I guesses; but what's wanted?"

"I would like to speak with you, sir," said the stranger, advancing and calling Black Larry to one side.

"All right, pards, let's walk out whar thar is fresh air," said Black Larry, and the two went from the saloon, as soon as the stranger had ordered "drinks set up for the crowd."

This act of generosity caused him to be set down at once as a gentleman.

"Well, my friend, what do you know about the Devil's Canyon?" asked the stranger, when he had walked out to a fallen tree and taken a seat upon it.

"They say it's haunted, pard."

"I have heard of such nonsense; but do you believe it?"

"I only b'lieve what I sees."

"You have seen nothing there to cause you to fear going there?"

"I didn't say that."

"What did you say?"

"I've seen and heard strange things up in the kentry, and thar is goin's on thar I has no sense to squar' up."

"What is done there?"

"Waal, thar is trails thar o' a strange kind, and I has heerd shots fired, but c'u'd never find the shooter, while the Injuns is afeerd ter go thar, sayin' it are the home o' the Evil Spirit."

"But you go up through that country?"

"I hain't ventured inter Devil's Canyon."

"But you might?"

"Thar's no tellin' what a man mou't do, pard, ef he were put to it."

"You are a hunter, I believe?"

"Waal, yes, I hunts, guides some, traps when pelts is prime and shoots Injuns, when they needs it."

"And you are willing to go?"

"How much is it worth?"

"A few hundred pesos now, and more when successful."

"And what is to be did?"

"I can trust you?"

"Waal, I guesses you'll hev to, if yer wants work did."

"It is a most important matter ter me."

"Likely, as yer is willin' ter pay big fer it."

"Now there is something I wish you to find out for me, and to do."

"Are you afraid of a little blood-letting?"

"You mean my own blood?"

"No, another's?"

"My record don't show I is nary skeert at blood spillin', or afeerd to spill my own when it comes to it."

"You are the man I want."

"And I wants your gold, so I guessas we kin strike a bargain."

"No doubt of it."

"But what's ter be did?"

"Get a thorough outfit, and go into the Devil's Canyon country and camp there."

"Pretend to be hunting, trapping, anything, only keep your eyes open all the time to do my work."

"When it is done I will pay you handsomely."

"Whar'll I find yer?"

"I come there in search of you, so give me an idea as to where you can be found."

"All right, pard; but now what is I ter do?"

The stranger looked cautiously about him, and then stepping nearer to Black Larry told him in a low tone his reason for sending him into the country about the Devil's Canyon, where he would have to face the deadliest dangers.

The next day Black Larry started upon his solitary trail.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BLACK LARRY.

BLACK LARRY in substance was a trapper, after the bachelor-bearer order. He roamed far and wide, and in the winter, when pelts were prime, could generally be found far to the Northwest. When summer came he very strangely steered a different course. Then the Southern plains seemed to allure him, and, like the lazy vagabond that he was, he basked in the warm sunshine from the top of some wagon, belonging to a train, whose master was only too glad to get his valuable company; or he wandered out alone, or with a comrade, to live at ease and comfort in some unexplored, game-supplying fastness of the wilderness. He was a trapper-tramp of questionable character and uncertain location.

Black Larry had made for himself a solitary camp near the borders of a stream, and was spending the hours apparently at his ease. True, he wandered far from the camp that he made his headquarters, but he seemed to have no particular aim in view. The beaver floated unmolested in his dam, and the otter crawled up and slid down the banks in joyous safety. Now and then a buffalo or an antelope fell, but it was to furnish food. Pelts were no longer prime, and hides were not worth the labor and expense of transportation. Evidently Black Larry was rusticating.

Larry was a taciturn man, moreover, as might readily be surmised, from a brief consideration of his habits. He might have had schemes with "millions in them" when he left the last trading-post, and he would have said nothing of them. As the reader has found that there was some ulterior aim in his thus seeking solitude, he need not be surprised.

It was again near sundown when Larry came back one day, toward his humble little hut. He had been absent since early in the morning, and he was returning empty-handed.

He did not worry on that account. He had killed a buffalo the day before, and taken some choice cuts into camp. The stream near by would furnish water, and he had a supply of coffee. Under the cloudless sky he could sleep through the night, if need be, and so he felt rather light-hearted and free of all care.

As he neared the carefully concealed cabin he dismounted, and, leaving his horse some little distance in the forest, advanced with a caution that was habitual upon returning home. He looked to the right hand and the left in order to catch the earliest possible glimpse of anything that might betoken danger.

Something not altogether expected seemed to strike his attention, and his caution was redoubled. He moved forward on the very tip-toe of care, and held his rifle at a ready.

By and by a savory smell saluted the olfactory organs of the tired and hungry man. He turned his head this way and that, and knew he could not be mistaken. Some one had kindled a fire right upon his own hearthstone, and was cooking upon it some of his buffalo-meat.

He judged that it was his meat, since he thought that any one who had the impudence to occupy his camp would not stop at testing the quality of his larder. It remained to be seen who this unknown visitant or visitants could be.

Black Larry parted the bushes carefully with one hand and gazed through the rift thus made. His other hand held his rifle, ready for instant use.

He started back with every indication of surprise. Then, with a broad grin upon his face, he looked again.

Noiselessly as he moved, the person who had thus intruded, unasked, upon his premises, had been alarmed, and looking up, met his gaze; as if by instinct knowing exactly where to look.

Then Larry stepped out of his covert and moved with all the swagger of a bravado toward the person kneeling by the fire. If it had been a man or an elephant, Larry would have acted in exactly the same way. But it happened that this person was a woman.

"Minks an' muskrats! hind sights an' trigger guards!—what's these yere goin's on?"

The woman rose and faced him bravely. She did not seem to be at all alarmed at his rough visage and frowning brow, but frankly met his scowl with a smile that should have disarmed resentment or led villainy captive.

"I cry you mercy, worthy hunter, if I have cast myself upon an unwilling host. It is but seldom that I trouble in that way."

"'Trouble,' my young patch of squawgrass. What d'yer mean invadin' the camp o' the royal grizzly from the mounting that's jist rolled down on wheels. Hyar are reechness. By the west end o' the Rockies, ef ther gal ain't chosed the very partikular j'int I war countin' on makin' my supper on, an's deevourin' it afore my very eyes. Hev yer got a dead open an' shut thing on life, as yer come into my camp an' cut up yer monkey didoes afore me?"

"The matter of a pound or more of buffalo-meat and a stick or two of dry wood will hardly ruin you, Sir Trapper. Coming from out of the desert, after a long and hasty ride, I took the nourishment that dropped to my hand. If you must be so churlish, what have you to say about it?"

The girl looked at the trapper with an open look of fearless innocence that was in perfect accord with her words. She galled him to the very quick with the *sang froid* with which she treated his threatening words and gestures. While Larry spoke she went on eating. His dramatic points were lost upon

her, and she evidently intended, welcome or unwelcome, to finish her meal.

Larry laid down his rifle, stooping as he did so. As he rose, there flashed upward from his leggin, with a wonderful flourish, a broad-bladed bowie-knife.

"D'yer want yer ha'r cut fur nuthin' that yer cum foolin' 'round ther camp of a lone buffler? Come forrads, my leetle peraire chick, an' stand hyar, while yer Uncle Larry takes a squint at yer. No slobberin' 'round, neither. I'm suddint death on all cryin' weemen."

Larry frowned at the delicate girl, brandished the knife in his right hand, while he drew the edge of his left hand in a significant gesture across his throat.

The girl looked up into his face and laughed a merry, ringing laugh. She shook her superbly poised little head and a shower of ringlets flashed a stream of golden light athwart his gaze.

"Fearful man, I defy you. Your threat is a joke. I came like a phantom, I shall go like a dream. You have entertained an angel unwillingly and unawares; your reward will come some day."

"Put up your knife and say good-by; I am going."

Larry looked at her in astonishment and anger.

"I sw'ar I b'lieve she's laughin' at me!"

The great, liquid blue eyes of the woman fell upon him full, and he saw in them a disdainful light, while her red, full lip curved in angry scorn. Maddened by the manner of this singular girl, Larry sprang forward with his hand outstretched to clutch her. She eluded his grasp, and with an accent of fear well feigned, if feigned it was, exclaimed:

"Your pardon, friend hunter, do not harm me, for I am a weak woman!"

"Cuss yer weak women, generally, the'r' at ther bottom of all devilment whar there's no red-skins consarned!"

Again the woman sprang to the side, clapping her hands together thrice.

"Death, Head, and Thighbones!"

As she uttered this strange exclamation she again clapped her hands three times, and running lightly eluded the now maddened trapper, as though she were a shape born of the air.

Larry heard some sounds foreign to the spot, and halted, turning toward where his rifle lay. As he did so, three wolves, long and gaunt, leaped through the bushes and halted a few yards off with their eyes fastened upon himself and the girl.

She waved her hands.

Instantly the wolves separated. Crouching, cowardly skulking, yet apparently magnetized into courage, they flanked him on either side, and one stood in front, their upper lips wrinkled in a savage manner, their tongues, red and dripping, lolled out, and their eyes roved quickly from himself to the girl and then back again. At the same time, snatching up a bow from the ground where it had lain unperceived, with magical quickness the strange woman fitted an arrow to the string, and drawing it to the head with a powerful sweep, she exclaimed:

"Hands down, trapper, or you are a dead man!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A WARNING.

For a moment the surly trapper fairly rioted in suppressed anger.

The wolves crept up uncomfortably near, and he had an unpleasant suspicion that the muscles of the young woman might fail her suddenly. In that case the iron-headed arrow, that pointed at him from a dangerously near bow, would doubtless make a double hole in his garments. From the very way in which the bow crooked back in its bending, he doubted not that the arrow would pierce him through and through.

Larry's left side was nearest the girl. In bringing his right hand down, at the stern mandate which closed the preceding chapter, he endeavored to let the forefinger and thumb of that hand draw, *en passant*, the revolver which swung provokingly handy on that side.

"Halt, there! None of that, my brawny trapper. No more weapons until we arrange our relations toward each other a little more definitely. What have you to say why I

should not pierce you with this arrow, or launch my pet lambs upon you? Look! A word from me, and Death-Head, and Thighbones would sink their teeth deeply in your sulky carcass."

The ringing notes of the girl's voice began to exorcise the demon of wrath. Their flowing melody had its effect, and his dark face brightened.

"Canyons and cattermounts! my leetle angel, whar in all paradise did yer kim from? Larry Delain is treed an' comes down, so quiet them lambs o' yourn an' tork sense. Slacken up that string, er p'int yer arrer jist a leetle slantindickerler in a t'other d'rection, an' I give yer the honest word I'll play yer fair."

In accordance with this overture upon the part of the trapper the young girl allowed the bow to slowly straighten; but kept it held in readiness for instant use upon the first suggestion of treachery or bad faith.

"You have ruffled your feathers up very needlessly and acted like a brute. From your actions I can hardly say whether you are a villain, or a great, tearing, swearing braggadocio. What had I done that you should act so violently? Had I been a weak and unprotected female would you have harmed me, or mistaking me for such, was it only your intent to give me a good scare for intruding upon your solitude? I hope it was the last."

Larry Delain seated himself composedly upon the ground and looked in an abstracted way at the questioner. There was nothing offensive in his look and the girl submitted to his silent scrutiny without remark. When he had finished taking his inventory he gave a great yawn, and exclaimed abruptly:

"Durn all pesky weemen, anyhow!"

The other gave a merry little laugh.

"So. You are a woman-bater? You went into a hot rage at the first sight of a feminine in your camp. I am sorry for you. I know very little about the gentle sex, to be sure, but I don't think they are to be so cavalierly spoken of, and I am afraid some particular spite at one of them has put you out of conceit of the whole class. Well, it's a pity. You must own that I have kept my courage and my temper very fairly under the trial you have given them, and perhaps if you think over it you will feel ashamed of the way in which you treated a wandering girl who, by an unusual chance, found herself half-starved and sought your hospitality."

"Oh, cuss the horsepi-tolities all up in heaps! A pettycut kin talk the bark off'n a white-pine stump ef yer gi'n her tongue a chance to woggle; but yer can't make nothin' outen Larry Delain but what he are. Stop! Ef yer goin', jist one word. What mou't be the handle they call yer to grub by?"

The desire for flourish was not altogether gone from the heart of the man. When the girl looked down upon him to answer, he sat there in an expectant attitude picking his teeth composedly with his nine-inch bowie. Once he glanced thoughtfully toward the wolf furthest off.

"That is a fair sign of repentance, but I doubt if I ever give you occasion to call me to your table again. If you do have need, call me Florence. And now, trapper, I am going; beware how you follow me. I doubt if you wish to kill me—remember that any more folly on your part, or sign of designed molestation, and one of us dies. Come, my lambs, this way, come."

The three wolves were still squatted around the trapper, whom they eyed askance as though he was a puzzle that they would very much like to pick to pieces in the solving. Being thus addressed, they delayed not a moment, but sprung in front of their mistress and made their way toward the neighboring edge of the forest.

Again the girl halted. The sounds of a horse approaching at a gallop fell upon her ears, and she awaited the result of the interruption.

A magnificent mustang dashed into view, threading his way through the timber with an ease that never once allowed an unevenness of his pace. The mustang was a beautiful brown stallion, with a broad white blaze upon his face, a white stocking on his off hind leg, and with long, flowing mane and tail. Neither saddle or bridle had ever, apparently, been upon this magnificent animal,

which seemed to be a wild, free mustang from the plains.

Larry Delain scrambled toward the spot where his rifle yet lay. There is a savage viciousness about some of them single going wild stallions that will make even an old plainsman look to his lines of defense when they make their appearance.

"Halt there, trapper; it is my friend, and he brings news that may be of service to you. What is it, Starlight?"

The mustang thus addressed halted, tossed its head and gave an impatient stamp with its forefoot.

"Ah, some one comes and you think it time that we be off. Well, well, steady, my boy, in a moment."

This was said to the horse. Then turning to Delain, who was standing viewing the beautiful mustang with an admiring and perhaps a covetous eye, she continued:

"Starlight, here, is one of my scouts, guides and pickets. Just now he tells me that some one is approaching. From his actions I judge that those who come are Indians, and of a tribe unknown, perhaps unfriendly. Look well to your scalp then; and if you have no particular business to keep you here I would advise that you beat a sudden and careful retreat. Good-by, and may you be in a less churlish humor should we meet again. Come, Starlight."

The steed obeyed the wave of her hand. It turned as with graceful bounds she reached its side.

For a moment Florence ran by the side of the animal with her right hand resting across his shoulder. Then, light as a feather she floated up, and lighted upon his back.

Larry Delain looked on in amazement. She had told him that she had come like a phantom and would go like a dream; now he believed her. Before he had fairly mastered his surprise she gave a graceful wave of her hand, another smiling shake of her head, and was gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SINGULAR SCOUTS.

WHEN the strange young girl left the presence of Black Larry she advanced straight toward the not very distant edge of the timber, for the purpose of investigating whatever might have alarmed her mustang. She went forward as far as was possible, and at the same time have the benefit of the concealing shade.

Here she paused and looked vainly around, at the same time calling in a low tone:

"Susan, Susan!"

There was no response; across the wide plain, as far as her eye could reach, there was nothing in sight.

Again she called, and again there was no answer.

A troubled look swept across her face. Tapping her horse softly upon the neck, she exclaimed:

"Starlight, good steed, pray tell me where is Susan?"

The animal seemed endowed with almost human intelligence. He appeared to even understand this address, since he threw his head back and gave a low whinny, which may or may not have been intended to convey the desired information. Having done this, Starlight stretched out his lean, brown head in the direction of the plain, and moved a step or two forward, as if to indicate that something in that direction demanded the attention of his mistress.

"Gone, you say? What a pity it is, old fellow, that you have no intelligible voice. With all your training and all your intelligence, you are but a horse after all, and sometimes I understand you but badly. What is it you wish to say just now?"

The animal made a movement or two of its lips, and gave utterance to a slight sound, that was just the whisper of a neigh. Having done this, he turned so that his head pointed in a direction almost parallel with the boundary line of the timber, and showed plainly that his wish was to be gone.

Still she saw nothing before her to give her any uneasiness. When she listened, her sharp ears heard but one sound that seemed worthy of her attention, and that she felt almost certain was made by the trapper from whom she had so lately parted. Evidently he was mounted, and was coming cautiously

in her direction, impelled thereto by the warning she had given him.

For this she could not blame him; but it was not her intention, for the present, at least, to enter again into conversation with Black Larry if she could possibly avoid it.

Without delay, then, she allowed her horse to follow the evident bent of his wishes, and started northward.

Hardly had she vanished from sight when Larry Delain made his appearance at the spot where she had halted.

The trapper moved cautiously, for the warning given by the girl had not been lost upon him. His own powers of observation were sufficient to convince him that the white-faced brown stallion had perceived something of a suspicious nature, and he was too wary to pass by such a fair notice.

His own horse was also exceedingly well trained and could be trusted. Accordingly, the hunter felt his way cautiously to the south; in that direction alone could there be concealed danger; to the right there was a sweep of the timber, beyond which an army of foes might be advancing, and yet remain unseen. Leaving, then, his horse, Delain crept cautiously along the sweeping curve, out to the projecting point of this timber promontory.

After he had looked vainly for some time, striving to learn in which direction might lie the menacing danger, he was surprised to see at some distance out upon the plain, a small troop of wolves wandering idly southward, apparently without any particular aim or object.

Upon a moment's reflection he was convinced that these were the identical friends whose acquaintance he had made a short time since—Death, Head, and Thighbones!

"A queer set of names those fer a queer trio," and he studied their antics with much more of interest than he was accustomed to devote to the lupine species.

The wolves caracoled along gayly enough for a time. As they passed the spot where Delain was concealed they halted for a moment and focused their noses upon the spot with a unanimity that was alike surprising and uncomfortable. Larry had, indeed, for a moment, an idea that they were about to charge him. Three ordinary wolves he would not have minded; but three educated and enlightened wolves dropping in upon a lone man at one time needed attention. It was well that they gave a contemptuous sniff and galloped away. They were just within range of Black Larry's rifle, and in a moment more he would have forgotten all about Comanches, and let go.

Delain saw them pass on with a sigh of relief. Not that he was afraid of the animals. His desire was to see whether the strange troop was scouting, and if he could learn the result of their investigations.

Suddenly the wolves halted again. They turned the axes of their noses toward a point in the timber line as straight as the needle swings to the North Star.

Then sitting in a crescent the three lifted up their heads and gave a lugubrious whine.

"Ho, ho!" chuckled Larry to himself. "Ther creetur's cunningness kims inter play right sassy. Thar's whar ther danger lays. Now is it Injun er white, friend er foe? I'll hev to scout up that way and find out myself."

Black Larry and the three wolves for a time watched the spot in partnership. As nothing appeared, the duty became irksome to both parties, and presently the animals turned as if to canter back. Before they had gone a rod they stopped and turned their noses directly up the wind. Evidently they scented something that was yet out of sight.

They showed their sagacity, however, by making no pause. Whatever might be coming in that direction would be visible to their young mistress as quickly as to themselves. In reality their task was done, and they once more were on the move, scurrying away with all the natural want of dignity common to their species.

"Somethin' comin' over thar, too. The lines is a-drawin' in, an' chance to make it right lively accordin'. Them'll keep, an' the investin' goes to them around the turn. 'Hold on, though. Look at them condemned varmints. What's in the wind now?"

This exclamation was caused by seeing the wolves suddenly returning. They bounded

by at full speed, and obliqued to the left, striking for a point something like half a mile away, out upon the plain, where lay the carcass of a buffalo, slain a day or two before by Delain.

At first the trapper thought it was their intention to gorge themselves with the meat which remained there in plenty.

But no. The wolves made a wide circuit and then went racing back. Impelled to a close scrutiny by these antics, Larry Delain brought his keen eyes to bear upon the spot—and not without a result.

"Bullets an' b'ars, thar's a red-skin's top-knot just ahind the buffler's corpus," he cried with some excitement of manner.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LARRY MAKES A DISCOVERY.

THE discovery of the fact that a savage Indian was probably hiding behind the carcass of the buffalo was sufficient to give to Black Larry an idea of who might be concealed in the timber below. At last he fancied that the Indian would hardly be exercising so much caution unless he was keeping an eye upon some of his natural enemies—white men.

Keeping this Indian under a general sort of espionage, by frequent glances through the timber, Delain moved with every symptom of care in the direction of the spot where he felt assured he would find white men encamped.

The trapper soon found that he had not been mistaken in his calculations. In the course of a very few moments he approached a camp which had been made less than an hour before, by its present occupants.

Moving cautiously, Delain was able to get within earshot without being perceived, and at the sound of the voices he then heard he went boldly yet silently forward. Without a word of warning or announcement he suddenly appeared before the speakers.

His appearance seemed to cause a momentary flurry of excitement. Unmoved by the sudden click of the locks of several rifles, he glanced contemptuously around him and turning to the man who seemed to be the leader exclaimed with a laugh:

"Pierre Roscaro you've come yerself, have yer? Ef this yere is the way camp's kept I'll hev the mournful pleasure of totin' back yer outfit to trade on tombstones. 'With Comanch' around and danger a-blossomin', ye hev an all-fired keerless way o' placin' yer lay-out."

"Larry Delain, is that you? You startled us with your sudden appearance and it is a chance that you did not receive a death-shot while thus skulking up on the camp. Hank Meyers, our guide, is out scouting for Comanche, of which he thought he saw sign, and we had camped here for the night. At all events we have found *you*?"

"Glad to hear yer say so. R'lieves my mind. Thort it was me found you. You couldn't trust me to do my work, an' kim up to take a hand in it yerself. Good! I'm glad on it. Take the job right now, plum on the spot. I resigns."

"Don't get excited, Larry, I meant no disrespect or want of confidence. I came myself in consequence of some new developments; and of course I didn't care to come alone. Sit down, man, and be comfortable; tell us what progress you have made and I will give you further instructions. Hank, Caballos here, and myself will all join in accomplishing the work, which, without meaning any reflection on your ability, I think you would find rather too much for one man."

"Settin' around just now ain't exactly in my line, an' about the time Hark comes in it won't be in yourn neither. Thar's more ner Comanch' 'sign'—I've see'd 'em. They've nosed out yer camp a'ready an' one on the red devils hes his eye on this yere spot at this blessed minnit."

This declaration caused some excitement. The three men, if once detected by a hostile band of Comanches, would present no such imposing array of force as would impress them with the actual danger to be met with in attempting their capture. And just then Indian troubles were exactly what they did not desire, since it would prove a decided hindrance to their further and successful operations.

"You take it coolly enough. Why did

you not give us warning when you first entered camp? While we have been standing here talking our scalps might have been taken."

"Sell Black Larry for a fool, will yer? I've hed an eye on him, an' he's still a-lyin' where I left him safe and sound. When I see the danger gettin' a ugly look I won't be back'ard a-tellin' on you. Hyar, take a squint out torrad that dead buffler on the plain."

"Thar's whar the thing lies. Thar's a Comanche in full paint layin' low thar. He winded yer scent an hour ago an' got that fur torrads the timber, an' can't get no funder. He's waitin' fur it to get dark enough to crawl in, I reckon."

"If there is only the one there, would it not be best for us to take some means to quiet him? There are others near to whom he should not be allowed to carry his information."

"Mou't 'a' done it ef I'd know'd adzactly who war in this camp, but couldn't reesk pullin' on him till I found out. Yer kin bet yer bottom dollar he's not here fur nothin', an' he's more of his tribe somewhar handy ahind him."

"Could it be possible—do you think that their object could be the same as ours?"

"Can't say as I know percisely what yer object kin be at present. Ther's a bit of hoss-flesh, howsomever, that 'd fotch the hull tribe a hundred mile to rake in ef they ever onc't sot eyes on it."

While thus conversing Delain had drawn the two men to the edge of the timber. With care they concealed themselves as they advanced, until, after some little time, the others were able to see the tip end of the feathers in the head-dress of the Indian scout who was lying in ambush.

"It's too long a shot for old Roamer," said Delain, patting the butt of his rifle; "though I'll try it ef you say so. Best plan, though, I'll allow 'u'd be to let him 'lone fur a time. Give the critter a chance to develop. Maybe Hank 'll still-hunt him an' tote in his scalp-lock. Nothin' lost by not bein' in a hurry. Now about this yere business o' ourn. How about the gal?"

"Yes, how about it. As I tell you, there have been some later developments which make a difference in the manner of carrying out our little agreement. First let me ask you, have you succeeded in finding any trace of her in this region?"

"I hev—an' she's a ripper. Reg'lar angel on a whirlwind, Smart as a gray-headed otter, an' quick as a wolf-trap."

"And you have actually seen her?"

"Yer is right. Seen her, took her, skeerd her—an' let her go."

"Caramba!" quoth the other. "You let her go? Larry Delain, you would not dare to play me false, would you?"

"Easy with yer Mexican cuss-words. Kin I hold greased lightnin'? Ef she war common kind o' gal-meat she'd hardly be worth the huntin' of. Ketch her yerself ef yer think I'm wentin' back on yer."

"What do you mean, then, by telling me that after the trouble and expense and danger—"

"Jist a minute. Bizness over thar. I'm keepin' an eye on that Comanch', an' there's a stirrin' in the waters that means suthin'."

There seemed to be some reason in the sudden interruption. The most careful gaze failed to distinguish any trace of the scout, who had but lately been ensconced behind the carcass. He seemed to have wormed away without attracting attention, and Black Larry looked in vain in every direction. The Comanche was not in sight.

Roscaro looked at the trapper with a glance that was almost suspicious.

"I wish Meyers would come. I do not understand why you allowed that Indian to escape without an effort at least, to prevent it. What shall we do now?"

"Wait on Hank Meyers, in course, and keep our eyes peeled. What was the ust sculpin' the red critter, anyhow? Ef they ain't strong they mayn't bother us, onless they see chances to stampede our corral. Lift one on 'em's ha'r, an' see ef they ain't a-pop-pin' away at us el'ar from hyar to the nearest settlement. Hark! thar's somethin' goin' on now."

Far away beyond the spot where the Comanche had been lying, they heard the rattle

of horses' hoofs, and saw, in the gathering twilight, a number of dark forms charging across the plain in the direction from which came the wind, and where, in the distance, two horsemen appeared, pushing on a pair of jaded horses and heading straight for the spot where the anxious watchers were stationed.

CHAPTER XXX.

HOPE DEFERRED.

WE left Hart Hazel and Burt Davis standing at midnight in their camp listening to hoof-strokes that were rapidly dying away in the darkness.

Hazel was the more excited; perhaps Davis was the most deeply moved.

The young man ran toward his horse, which was near by, and loosening him from the lariat, leaped upon his unsaddled back and, with drawn revolver in his hand, darted out upon the trail.

Davis remained standing under the little cottonwood. He shouted once or twice to his companion to come back, and receiving no answer, seated himself upon the ground, with his face resting in his hands. After a time he heard Hazel returning slowly, and apparently full of thought.

"No use to ask you what you have seen?" said Davis, as Hazel halted by his side.

"Dismount, put away your horse and retire to slumber again. It will be time enough in the morning to talk over this strange interruption. I think that there is no danger that the intrusion will be repeated—for this night at least."

"Sleep! I cannot sleep! What think you is the meaning of this? Who was it that came into our camp, and why did she come?"

"What word did you use?"

"She."

"She?"

"Yes, I am right. It *was* a woman. 'Haste! haste! save her! save her!' There is more in this singular journey than I had dreamed of. Think you that these were material forms—or may they not have been but the phantoms bred in frenzied brains? I have heard of such things. May not all this be but a mirage, think? Perhaps we are this moment lying, dying upon the desert. Do you remember how we were suffering last night at sunset?"

At this strange suggestion of Hazel's, Davis shuddered.

Yet he did not so far give way to the excitement of the moment. He held closer to steady, every-day realities. His brain was not prone to send him wandering in the clouds, and so he was not so liable to be unlinged by shade or phantom.

"When we see what we cannot explain, we are apt to explain more than we see. Again I say, let us sleep, and with the morning light we will take up the trail, which, believe me, is there. We will haste. We will save her. From what, we will know in due season."

"Ay, but the wolves. They were close upon her track. When morning comes they may have left nothing but a few crushed bones."

"Never fear. There is something strange in all this, but the danger that menaces her is not of the wolves. I see now. I have heard of this singular being. Only once or twice; but often enough to recognize that the strange story told me by a man, who trapped through the streams to the Southwest one winter, may be true. If so, you need not fear."

"Do you think it is she?"

Davis nodded solemnly.

"Yes. It is she; the woman of your dream. Something has put us upon her trail, though God only knows why. Once we have made a find, there is no danger that we shall be thrown off. Again I say, let us rest while we may; perhaps it may be long ere we find the opportunity again. The desert stretches out far and wide around us."

"Yes, but we can certainly follow the trail which we know now lies before us. That must lead either to another camping-ground or to the Rio Pecos."

"Only that her mustang can cover in one day the ground that would take us two."

"Sleep be it, then, and Heaven send no more dreams."

"Amen!" solemnly responded the other.

The slumbers of the two through the balance of the night were uninterrupted, and at early dawn they arose, reinvigorated in nerve and physical strength to prepare for the march.

Without much difficulty they found the trail left by the intruder of the previous night. In fact they found the marks showing the direction from whence the visitant had come, making an acute angle with that taken upon leaving.

"Look! see here!" exclaimed Davis, pointing to the ground. "Note these tracks. The wolves came in upon this route and left by the other. They followed at their ease; perhaps ran along by the side of the mustang which bore your dream woman. No need to save her from them."

"No, thank Heaven, you are right, I pray that she may find water within the day. She may have had a chance to slake her thirst, but we know that her horse did not, and if he fails her on the desert she is lost."

"If he fails her we shall pick her up; never fear, so there is water within a two days' march. And the sagacious brute will guide her toward the nearest spring, if her knowledge fails her."

"Move forward then, upon the new trail. Sooner or later we must overtake her. I would give a thousand, though, to know what the danger menacing her really is."

For a day they pushed hard upon the trail which lay before them. Sometimes it was broad and plain, sometimes faint and to be found only with difficulty.

Night came and they were still upon the desert. Only that single thread of a track tied them to life. Without it they would have groped blindly—perhaps have perished miserably. They camped for a short time upon the arid plain, but with the rising sun they urged their horses onward once more.

Toward noon they came upon another spring something like the one they had already found, only it had already been almost exhausted, and what little water was in it was brackish and almost unfit to drink. The saw around it the footprints of the mustang and the wolves. There, too, was the impress of a tiny, slender, moccasined foot, that revealed itself more clearly than any yet seen.

"See! the footprint of my dream!"

To Hazel's exclamation his companion merely nodded. When the brackish water was exhausted he had sought to renew the supply by enlarging the little spring, and deepening its bowl.

The water oozed up but slowly, and Hart looked on with impatience.

"Folly! Let us be up and off. It would be hours before the spring would supply all our wants. We are refreshed, let us hasten on. It cannot be many miles to that blue line in the distance, and we must reach it before night."

Davis agreed. They forced their horses away from the spot and renewed their flight.

The animals began to show the effects of the long and arduous journey. Their pace flagged, their step had lost all elasticity. And as if to mock them they saw by the trail that the mustang which preceded them galloped as freely and as strongly as ever.

Still their case was by no means desperate. The blue line of timber magnified the pleasant scenery beyond stretched out before them, with its features more and more distinct. It seemed that the haven of rest would be won by nightfall.

As they drew nearer to the edge of the desert Burt Davis reined in his horse. As it halted he gave a long and troubled look at the country before him. With his outstretched hand he pointed at a wavering column of smoke, so attenuated as to be scarcely visible to eyes less keen than such as his.

"A careful hand feeds that fire," said he after a moment's contemplation. "Can it be that we are trailing her right into camp? If so what excuse can we give for our presumption?"

"Let the meeting provide for its excuses. Not yet will we reach the end of our journey. No quiet camp-fire scene will be our first meeting. Something tells me so. Something speaks of danger, struggles, perhaps death."

Hazel spoke gloomily. Meantime Davis

remained with his eyes fixed upon the spot where the vapor-like column arose.

"Strange. Look! See. It deepens—broadens. There has been some interruption, or all caution has been suddenly dropped. That sign could be noted miles away by the merest tyro in wood craft. Something has happened; let us hasten forward."

Time slipped by. Progress with weak and tired horses was of necessity slow, yet at last they neared the sweeping line of timber.

The sun was just flinging its last rays over the scene; nature lay in the hush that precedes the coming of twilight.

Then, with a sudden crash of yells and whoops and war-cries, a score of Comanche Indians burst upon them, and almost certain death stared them in the face.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DEAD AND BURIED.

THE horses of the two white men were jaded and weak; those of the Indians were fresh and strong. The Indian warriors swept around and across their trail. Spite of spur and voice Hazel and his friend found their steeds failing them, and the road to the comparative safety of the timber obstructed by an advancing squadron that threatened to overwhelm them. Shots and arrows fell around and upon them, and a succession of horrible whoops struck their ears.

Almost at the first outcry, the horse of Hazel fell, pierced with three or four arrows. His rifle was flung far from him, and he dropped in a confused heap, while a red stream of blood suffused his face.

Davis for a time fought valiantly. He poured shot after shot out of his rifle and quickly-drawn revolver. Although taken by surprise, in the moment that was given him for action he carved his mark broad and wide with his knife, after emptying every chamber of his revolver.

He struggled bitterly, but the odds were too great. A blow felled him from his saddle to the ground, where he lay motionless. One of the savages had an arrow fitted to his bow, and was about to transfix him where he lay, but was stopped by the others. Several sprung down and flung their arms about him before he recovered from the stunning stroke upon his skull. When reason came slowly back to Davis, he found himself bound hand and foot athwart a mustang in front of a brave, and being borne rapidly away from the scene of the conflict.

How it happened that Davis thus found himself carried away can be easily told.

Just in the very heat of victory, when the Comanches were uttering their wild yells of triumph, a shot or two was heard, and as many Indians fell. Then, from the direction of the timber, a number of white men came charging out to the rescue. They should, perhaps, have struck in sooner. There was a little delay. For this perhaps, Pierre Roscaro was to blame. Was it timidity, or what could it have been, that he held up his hand and stayed the first impulse of the others, which was to rush out?

So rapid were the movements of the Comanches that, at best, it would have been impossible to check the attack, or to have changed the result of their assault. Before they could have reached them the mischief would have been done.

"Just a minute, wait," urged Roscaro. "I hear the footsteps of Meyers, and the noise will hasten him, I am sure. He will be here in an instant, and is worth having in the struggle that we may expect."

Meyers was indeed coming, and as he burst into sight Larry could no longer be restrained.

"Come on yere, Hank. There's white men goin' under, an' we a-standin' like durn cowards a-seein' of it. Whoop, thar, four to forty, an' down they goes!"

The four charged out like a whirlwind, firing as they went. Hazel and Davis were down, and they rode madly forward to save the scalps of the two. Their appearance was instantly noted, and as they came fearlessly forward, the courage of the Comanches gave way. A panic struck those upon foot—an unhorsed Comanche is the coward of all cowards—they bundled their captive upon a horse, and without waiting to scalp the inanimate head of Hazel, who lay covered by the bodies of his horse and two Indians, they dashed away in momentary flight.

Having done this much the four white men scarcely felt like pushing their success any further. Outnumbered even yet three to one, should the Comanches once recover and turn, the struggle might prove disastrous to the whites. They contented themselves, therefore, with a couple of parting shots and exultant cries; then Delain and Meyers turned their attention to the field of battle.

Four of the Comanches had fallen, of whom three had been killed outright; the fourth received the *coupe de grace* from the hand of Meyers. The dead savages were rudely cast aside and Hazel's dead horse rolled away. Then they carefully examined his body.

There was no sign of motion or life. Upon his head there was the mark of a desperate blow, given by some hard, blunt weapon, and upon his breast a pair of gashes, sufficient, one would think, to drive the life out of a dozen men.

"Dead ez mack'rel, bu'sted, wiped out, an' went under," said Meyers softly, as he looked down upon the face of Hart Hazel.

"Dead ain't no name fur it. A likely lookin' young chap he war, too. Kinder seems to me ez tho' we war in some way to blame, an' it makes me feel bad under my right ear. I reckon ef yer hadn't been pokin' around so slow we mou't 'a' been in time. To think I see'd him rubbed out an' on'y saved one on 'em. Blast ye, Roscaro, ye'r a durned coward. Ye throw'd up on the traces, right in the time o' need."

Larry turned angrily toward where he supposed Pierre Roscaro was standing, and was surprised to see that he was gone. A glance around revealed the fact that he was walking moodily apast, with his head bent down, his arms behind his back, apparently communing with himself.

"Good men go down like a flash. He mou't 'a' bin an angel with the irons, but he hadn't no show. Somehow I's sorry for the boy."

Meyers's remarks recalled Delain to his investigation of the body.

"Tain't no use. A gallon o' red-eye c'u'd be poured inter his nozzle 'thout makin' a sneeze. All we can do fur ther lad now is to save his scalp an' take warnin'. He mou't 'a' shot quicker by a shade, an' so changed the deal all 'round; but I ain't goin' to reflect on a boy that died game, with his boots on. Ketch holt, an' we'll tote him into the timber an' kiver him up."

"How about the other man?" suddenly queried Meyers.

"Curse the other man!" harshly interposed the voice of Roscaro.

Larry gave him a contemptuous look, and assisted by Meyers, proceeded to carry out the suggestion of giving some little respect to the remains before them.

It did not take long.

A narrow, shallow trench dug in the shade of the timber line received the body. Carefully the three men covered it up; carefully they smoothed it over. Then they rejoined Pierre Roscaro, whose actions seemed singular if they did not give positive offense.

"See hyar," said Delain, when the four again stood together, "I've a camp not fur from here, an' I purpose strikin' fur it an' linin' the insides o' my ribs with buffler. We kin look over matters a bit, I kin give yer an understandin' as how the land lays now with me, an' we kin all on us keep an eye open fur Comanch'. Ef they ain't down on us by sunrise, it'll be acause we've jumped this claim, an' struck fur safer grazin'."

"Ye'r mighty right," said Meyers, in response. "This yere huntin' expedition had better git, er count on swappin' boots to the other leg. Pull out, pard, an' we'll foller."

Without demur the others assented, and in silence Delain led the way toward his encampment.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BLACK LARRY'S STRANGE ACT.

"So you have seen the girl, have you?"

"Ye'r right, I've seen her. More ner that, she got the drop on me, an' then held the edge like a gentleman."

"And because you were outwitted by a girl you now propose to retire altogether from the business, and leave me in the lurch for all my trouble and expense?"

"Durn it all, no! I'll stay out till trappin' season begins ag'in. I've a hundred good

traps hid up on the Saskatchewan, an' when I come in I'll pay yer like a man, doubloon fur doubloon."

"A hundred traps hid a thousand miles from here in an Indian country may be capital for some one to raise a back-load of pelts from, but it's not you. Do you take me for a fool?"

"No, I take yer fur what yer are—suthin' a durned sight worse."

Roscaro leaped to his feet, his knife brandished; but Delain was the quicker. Two revolvers flashed from his belt, one in either hand. The one was for Pierre; the other was held at large, ready to be applied in any needed direction.

"Settle down, my leetle Mexican game-cock; I hev yer covered, an' she slings a nasty chunk o' lead. When I'm torkin' senst I don't want no sich humbuggin'. Lay low thar an' be easy."

"Not till you take back what you have said. I allow no man to call me scoundrel."

"An' I let no one-mule critter, white or red, woolly-head or Greaser, call me a liar. Drop them words, an' it's all easy ag'in atween us. Ef nct, this hyar range is too narrer, an' one on us hes got to leave it."

"Are you two going to sit and see me murdered?" asked Roscaro, in an altered tone, turning to the others.

Meyers gave a short laugh.

"Guess not; only it's not my turn to chip in. If Larry hed a-see'd me drawin', you'd bin a dead man afore I'd got my hand round. Larry knows me, an' I knows Larry, an' Caballos knows both on us better nor you do. Sit down, now, an' be reasonable. 'Thar ain't no murderin' to be done onless the redskins mount us ag'in."

"I'm agreeable," answered Delain. "Whatever's to be said, though, I want did up in double quick. It hain't safe hyer for you; an' es fur me—I'm off on the trail of them Comanch'. I hate the hull tribe from britch-cloth to toe-nail an' back to skull-lock ag'in. Besides they hev a white prisoner, an' I jist feel like droppin' down on 'em an' sp'ilin' the fun they've set up. Ef I kin give you any p'int's afore I go, rattle off yer questions—then go yer way an' I'll go mine."

The three stared at the speaker in amazement undisguised.

Up to this moment they had not supposed him to be in such thorough earnest, and they did not know how to deal with these evidences of sudden regeneration.

Hank the hunter looked at him with a quaintly quizzical look; studious to avoid giving offense, but at the same time unable to repress the feeling within him.

"He's got it right under the hump. Hit hard an' teetotally scooped. It was the woman done it. Let him go, Pierre, 'tain't no use to try to argue the matter; maybe in a week er so he'll come down to reason ag'in."

Black Larry gave no answer. He slowly returned his revolvers to his belt and looked around the little circle. The advice of Hank Meyers seemed to have fallen upon mellow ground. The other two remained motionless, and nothing was said or done to cause a change of a determination that seemed to be so positively fixed.

Delain turned and gathered up his effects, cast a lingering glance around, and then was gone. They heard his footsteps for a minute or two, then the sound of his horse's hoofs fell gently upon their ears. Soon they faded away in the distance and the three were alone.

Roscaro seemed relieved.

He had employed Delain to perform a certain service—to find a certain person. That duty had been perfected; but when he attempted to lead the trapper further on he suddenly met with a dangerous resistance, totally at variance with the idea he had formed of the man. Of the other two he had no fears, however, and it was something of a relief to have the place freed of the presence of one who, at any moment, might change the passive nature of his resistance into an aggressive one.

"The girl has evidently been here this very day," said Roscaro, after a few moments of silence.

"Yes, and your unmanageable tool that has just left us has been crazy enough to be attracted by her. What sort of looking creature do you suppose she is?" remarked Caballos.

"Handsome enough, no doubt, if she continues to resemble her mother. Handsome or not, it makes no difference to us, so long as we can get what stands behind. Young enough, and vain enough, I fancy, to be dazzled with the idea of plenty of gold at the present, and unlimited freedom of action hereafter."

"And if not?"

"Oh, well, what she wants or does not want, is a matter of indifference. The point is to prove her living, and obtain possession and transfer of her rights. Then she may retire so soon as she chooses."

Caballos laughed a little bitterly.

"All this trouble might have been avoided if you had not been so promiscuous in your revenge. Why could you not have been a little careful?"

"Never mind the past. What we have to do now, is to lay out our present plan of action. Let us hear what Meyers has to propose."

The guide thus addressed turned to face the speaker, and was on the eve of expressing the uppermost thought in his mind, when the conclave was suddenly interrupted in a strange and startling manner.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FROM THE VERY GRAVE.

THE supposed corpse of Hart Hazel rested for a time quite peacefully in the little grave hollowed out for it by the hands of Meyers and Delain. Blood on the forehead, blood on the breast, gashed and battered and bruised, this semblance of inanimate humanity had no occasion to complain of the lodging-place provided for it.

After a time, however, there was an uneasy twitching of the limbs, a quiver of life, running through all the muscles. The heart again resumed its pump-work; the wheels of life were once more in motion. Ricketty, shambling, weak, and top heavy the motion was, and hardly to be pronounced better than none at all. However that might be, the spark of vital flame had not yet left the frame of Hart Hazel, who now groaned heavily and gave a feeble effort to rise.

Folly! The weight of mountains was upon him. The moist, cool earth, that had acted as a kindly bandage to his wounds, held him now as in a vise. In some way a faint supply of air found its way to his breathing apparatus; but his inspirations were short and frequent, like the panting of a wounded, hard-run deer.

After this first effort he lay still and quiet; to scream was impossible, and he had been thrown into the grave in such a way that his arms were doubled under him, so that there was no possibility of aiding himself by the use of his hands. All was dark and oppressive.

A little piece of dirt fell into his mouth. It was a little thing, but it had to be disposed of, so he swallowed it, after some exertion. From that time, strange as it might seem, he appeared to breathe freer; but the place was getting uncomfortably warm. It was a wonder that hemorrhage from his wounds did not begin again.

Shortly after this return from death to buried life, a noise could be heard in the fair, free world above. Larry Delain was passing by.

The trapper paused in his course to give a glance at the spot where he had lately helped to deposit the young man.

"Rubbed out! We must all go some day; but somehow I feel parti'kier bad on that youngster. 'Pears to me he was a gay young rooster, an' I hated to see the game-bird rattled in the first go off. I've see'd 'em come round when they war hiped, rattled, coupled an' a wing broke; but he warn't o' that kind. Well, I hope he's sleepin' sound, an' nary a bad dream to skeer him. I must keep a-movin' ef I want to strike the trail at the spot I am fur."

In the stillness that brooded around the spot the words of this soliloquy could actually reach Hart Hazel's ears. Had he not been as weak almost as a newly-born infant, his answering moan might have been heard. But Delain passed away unsuspecting.

When the trapper finally disappeared three wolves came slinking toward the spot. They looked around timidly, snuffing anxiously as they advanced.

The animals followed closely the trail of the trapper until they reached the place where Hazel was lying, but there they suddenly stopped. Seated upon their haunches, they held their noses alternately up and down, as if somewhat in doubt.

The scent was too warm to miss their easily affected nostrils. With one accord they advanced to the spot under which lay Hart Hazel's body, and promenaded up and down over its smooth surface with low whines, indicative of uncertainty. Finally one of the wolves gave a low, long howl, and instantly all three set to work. Tooth and nail they tore up the loose ground, and scraped it away, making an excavation so large that it seemed wonderful in how short a time it was made.

In a few moments the exhumation was complete; the uncovered body lay motionless before the three wolves.

A sudden movement on the part of Hart Hazel in his grave caused the three wolves to spring sideways from the spot. Yet the spring seemed more the result of curiosity than fear. They stood a pace or two off, watching to see what would be done next.

Slowly and with difficulty Hart Hazel rose from his grave, and looked around him with a vacant sort of stare. He put his hands to his eyes for an instant, as if to remove the lingering traces of a troubled dream. When he took them down again the wolves were still before him.

Strength returned again. He raised to his feet rapidly, and turned from the bright moonlight before him, in which sat the three brutes, to the somber shade of the timber on his side. He stepped from the grave; he moved from the spot. With revived confidence in himself and his strength, he accelerated his pace until it became a wild run.

The wolves closed behind and kept at a certain, though respectful distance, in his rear.

Perhaps he was guided by the sound of voices; perhaps he bent his course by chance or instinct. Whatever may have been the attractive power, he came suddenly upon three men seated in conference, and who, from their actions, when he burst in upon them, might very easily have been taken for a trio of conspirators.

Hart Hazel dashed up to these three men, and stood before them in a wild and threatening attitude.

"Where is she?" he shouted.

"I have been called, and I come now—where is she hidden? Who menaces her? Is it you, senor, with the black face and blacker heart? Would you murder my darling with the golden hair and violet eyes? What crime are you plotting here among the foot-hills, for my queen of the desert? I have made haste—am I too late to save her?"

Roscaro shrunk back before this suddenly rising apparition, that charged home upon him the very crimes he was in his heart revolving. His hand dropped upon the ever ready weapons which he carried in his girdle, but he answered not a word as he saw Meyers spring forward suddenly and lay his hand upon the young man's shoulder.

Perhaps the grasp of the guide was unduly rough, though under the circumstances he could hardly have been expected to handle Hazel with carefully timed nicety. Nevertheless had he laid his hand ever so lightly upon him the result would probably have been the same. With the utmost precision of time and distance the fist of Hart Hazel shot straight from his shoulder out.

The blow landed upon the face of Hank Meyers with the weight of a trip-hammer. His head flew back; his heels flew up, and he measured his length upon the ground. Then Hazel glared an instant around, with a look of wild ferocity.

"Cowards! murderers! villains! You are plotting some wicked deed. I read it in your hearts; but beware! I shall foil you. I shall save her. See to it that you cross not my path, for I see death, cruel and certain, waiting for you all. Back! back from these sacred precincts, or meet the worst."

With a last wild gesture of warning, Hazel broke away. He followed the route taken by Florence, when she left the presence of Larry Delain. From the shade he rushed out into the open plain, and closing in behind him, Death, Head and Thighbones bounded merrily in his wake.

Every movement was made so rapidly that

by a shot alone could his course have been interrupted; and the men were in no humor for attempting that. The earnest manner of the young man had, for the moment, made a deep impression upon Roscaro, and Caballos was even more affected, since in this weird manner he recognized, with a feeling somewhat akin to horror, the moving, speaking form of the very person whom but a few short hours before he had seen buried by the two scouts, as they believed never to tread God's green earth again.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE GATE OF DEVIL'S CANYON.

The different and unconscious vagaries of fever are many and singular.

For a time Hart Hazel was as mad as the maddest. Possessed of a strength and speed that was almost supernatural, he ran for miles without pausing to rest, or even once feeling the need of doing so.

A madman's strength, while the fit of fever is on him, is something wonderful.

When Hazel once more recovered his consciousness, he found himself lying under the shade of a small tree. He was very weak, stiff and sore; and in addition was very hungry.

He at first found some difficulty in realizing just what had occurred—even after he had recalled the sudden attack by the Comanches, he had no means of knowing how he had come to his present position; since, from the moment when he had fallen from his horse, all was a dark blank.

Yet it did seem to him, like a dream, that he had come across certain men whom at first sight he suspected and hated.

A faint recollection of a dark and sinister face, that was turned toward him with an ill-boding frown upon it, dimly lurked in his brain.

How long it had been since this face had thus frowned upon him, what had been his wanderings and how he had subsisted since, he could not, for the life of him, tell.

At all events, he was living now, even if in a bruised and battered condition; and as he lay there, trying to gather his scattered senses, the phantom face of his dream came drifting back to him, to recall him to the fateful undertaking which yet lay before him.

At a short distance there rose a mountain range toward which some invisible magnet drew him, with a force that made his very muscles twitch and tremble. He arose to his feet and staggered toward the hills.

From out of an opening or pass, which seemed to lead into the heart of the hills, he saw three wolves come bounding forth.

Their appearance was no surprise. His wonder rather was at the very naturalness of their looks and actions.

They came toward him boldly, halted for a moment, and then began to retrace their course, with an air which seemed to beckon him on to follow in their wake.

He did not hesitate a moment, but strode onward at the most rapid pace which he was capable of. To his delight he found a clear rivulet of water, at which he took a refreshing draught and bathed his heated brow.

The pathway spread out plainer and plainer. It showed a distinct trail, beaten smooth by hoofs, tracks that lead away into the region of hill and valley before him, in a winding and ever slowly ascending thread, that was finally lost away above him.

He went forward on the pathway, with no certain object in view, yet with an idea that in some way it would lead him nearer to the accomplishment of the undertaking on which he had hazarded life and all at a moment's notice, as it were.

The march was not by any means a tiresome one. It was only his weak and fever-exhausted condition that made the journey of more than ordinary difficulty. The injuries which he had received, however, seemed to him, just now, trifling compared with the gnawing of hunger that raged more and more within him.

Hunger and love are generally considered incompatible ailments; but Hart Hazel proved, by actual experiment that the two may exist at the same time, and have their hold upon the same person.

His friends, the wolves, took the lead, and

he looked upon them with a kindly eye. Whence they came he knew not, but they were, to him, a section of his dream, and for that were welcome. Their tracks, like those of their phantom predecessors, doubtless would lead him straight on to the golden-haired woman he sought.

After a time, just when his step was growing haggard and weary the three wolves passed and turned to look at him. He came steadily on, and they wagged their tails slowly and in unison, as much as to say: "Come now, you are welcome."

At the sound of the noise made by the wolves, to Hazel's surprise he heard a voice, evidently of a boy, saying:

"Hal hal you are back again already; where is Florence? Where is Starlight? I did not hear you and their footsteps, but I suppose she must be coming."

Then the speaker stepped suddenly out from a leafy covert and stood in the path, facing Hazel, who was within a hundred yards.

Both seemed struck dumb with surprise; the boy at the unexpected stranger appearing in place of Florence—the young man at finding a boy, and a white boy at that, at a spot where he was least expected.

Hazel stepped forward; the other turned as if to fly. In another moment the boy would have been skimming up the pathway, when Hazel called out:

"Wait, boy! I am weak, wounded and harmless. Would you trust me less than these brutes have done? Who are you, and can you lead me where I can obtain food? I must die else."

The lad paused at this address given in an earnest, even pleading tone of voice. He turned and looked curiously at the pale, tottering young man, whose clothes were stained and frayed, and whose hair from its late wetting at the stream looked even more matted than ever.

"Who are you? You come in strange guise, and stranger yet, you come apparently in the company of these three animals, who never yet were friends with any one but myself and the person who trained them up from cubs."

The animals seemed to understand that they were alluded to and looked from one to the other as if they would like to explain the whole story. They leaped and whined; and gave such tokens as they were able, that the young man whom they had just piloted in was well worthy of confidence and should be treated with proper respect and consideration.

"They have attached themselves to me, I know not why, and I have learned to recognize them as friends, true and tried. They first met me a long time ago, perhaps a week, away out on the desert. They stole into my camp in company with some one I now judge to have been their mistress; they vanished once again, to appear at the side of my grave."

"At your grave!" exclaimed the boy, with a gesture of astonishment.

"Yes, at my grave, for I had been taken for dead, and was buried. They tore away the covering of death and dug me out again to life. Since then I have been distraught and wandered blindly. A short time ago they met me out upon the plain and led me hither. "I have much that I would say to you, since I can guess that to you it should be confided; but I need nourishment."

"A brief, but a strange story, yet I can trust you. The three pets would not have dreamed of thus attaching themselves to you unless they had been so hidden; and the consequences can now, I suppose be accepted. I suppose you can be trusted—if not you see that I am armed, and spite of their friendly mien there would be four of us to one. Follow me!"

The boy moved away with an elastic, springing step, Hazel following with a heavy mechanical gait that even the near prospect of the much-needed food and rest, could not serve to make lighter.

As they disappeared in the direction from which the boy had come, the three wolves turned sharply around with their eyes set toward the opening of the pass below. They looked at each other with an intelligence that was almost human, and then, as if inspired by a single impulse of thought, bounded down the trail together.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PLEGGED TO THE DEATH.

ALONG the stream near the mouth of the pass, which Hart Hazel had passed but a short time before, there led a trail, coming in from the south. It was narrow, faint, and gave no positive signs of by what or when made. Still it was there, and it gave evidence that there was a practicable road leading somewhere. It wound away, along the western bank of the stream, which followed the course of the range, and soon was lost to sight, though it left behind no doubt of its continued existence.

Along this trail, at the very time when Hazel was staggering toward his guides, the wolves, though at the distance of some miles and completely hidden from his sight, two men were making their way. These two men were Pierre Roscaro and Jose Caballos. Hank Meyers, the scout, was also almost within supporting distance, but he was lost from view among some recesses of the mountains that attracted his attention, and which not being difficult of access, he determined to explore.

Although Caballos was unacquainted personally with this country, he advanced boldly; too boldly, in fact, to evince good border training. Meyers had declared it as his opinion, from his general knowledge of the region, that it was not probable that danger would be met with, and his judgment was of value generally, since as scout, Indian-fighter, trapper or guide, he had but few peers. The danger, if any there was, would, in his opinion, come from behind.

Away off to the southwest the two men suddenly heard the ring of a rifle. Its echoes fell with strangely jarring unpleasantness upon the ears which caught them upon the instant. They halted at once to listen.

As they stood motionless, with their ears bent in the direction from whence they believed the sound to have come, some bushes but a few yards distant from them parted, and two men, unmounted but well armed, slowly swaggered out and toward Roscaro and his companion.

Hank Meyers, the guide, had the appearance of rather a genial desperado—these two had the looks of desperadoes without the geniality.

They were outlaws and cut-throats, pure and simple.

"Wal, old hoss, what do you make on it?" said the leading man of the suddenly appearing strangers, bringing down his hand with a slap upon the shoulder of Roscaro's horse.

So suddenly and so quietly had the desperadoes made their approach that this salutation was the first intimation which Pierre, preoccupied as he was in listening for further sounds from the spot where he had heard the gun shot, had of their presence. The animal which he bestrode gave a great bound at this cavalier treatment, and probably a less practiced rider than Roscaro would have been unhorsed.

On the instant Caballos had a revolver in his hand, ready for an immediate use upon the persons who thus intruded.

A glance satisfied him that he held the advantage, and he prudently awaited the decision of his friend, before opening the ball.

Roscaro, however, seemed to recognize the voice on the instant, and quieting down his horse with a word and a steady, powerful pull upon the reins, with perfect sang froid he turned to the two.

"Sonora Sam, I vow! You are as welcome as the first spring after a journey across the Llano Estacado. Did you hear that rifle-shot a moment since?—it may mean trouble for us, and there is no man whom I would sooner have behind me than Sonora Sam."

"Yes, I heard it, ap' I war thinkin' thet you mou't be bringin' up a hull bilin' lot of trouble fur us poor, peaceable critters, so I thort I'd come right to headquarters an' find out what was the lay-out."

"Queer place fur meetin'. Never thort on seein' you up hyar."

"I can say the same to you. The last time we met—over the border, you know."

Roscaro accompanied his ambiguous sentence with a jerk of the head which was intended to convey much, and which Sonora Sam seemed to thoroughly understand.

"Don't trifle on it, I kin stand to hear it, or Matt Horne, my pard, won't feel anyways alarmed at knowin' he's travelin' with a man thet war once strung up by the Texas Rangers. It war down on a cattle-drive that they took me, Matt, an' strung me up 'stho' I war a blind kitten er a wolf cub. D'sarved it, too!" he added, with a demoniacal chuckle.

Roscaro waved his hand, as if he were anxious to revert from the things that were past, to the needs of the present.

"Not more than others. All the world is about alike. Some must be hung, so the rest must be hangmen. It's only a matter of taste—except the consequences, I would as soon be the one as the other. I have met your *confreere* there also, before, if I mistake not, and I doubt if gossip can injure the character of any of us in his eyes. Now, if I am not too inquisitive, what is it that brings you into this part of the country?"

Sam looked at his ally with a singular expression. It was just a single glance, but it did not escape Roscaro.

"Rather sing'lar, I allow. It's off the drive, an' travelers worth the picking are skeerce. 'Twar chanet, kinder, an' a company of United States cavalry assistin'. We come down from the Overland route a-b'ilin', I tell yer, an' after we got in this yere neighborhood, the durned Comanches hev made it too lively to be pleasant."

Pierre Roscaro eyed the speaker with some doubt. The story was possible: he would have believed it if he had not caught sight of the single glance given by the man before he began. Something was behind this, though what, time only would disclose. Sonora Sam was smart enough to stick to any lie that, upon the spur of the moment, he might invent. At the same time it carried with it some grains of probability.

"So, then, you are here without any definite employment. Have you an outfit?"

"You bet. The hosses are *cached* in thar."

"And perhaps you wouldn't mind helping in a little job, that would not take up much of your time, and which would pay well?"

"Is it a cash job, right hard down on the nail?"

"Well, no; but you know me and can trust to my fulfilling my promises in regard to payment for any services you may render me. One of the men upon whom I counted has thrown off on me, right in the heart of the matter and even if I were to supply his place I would probably still be short of help to carry the thing through."

"And the work to be did?"

"To do as I tell you."

Sonora Sam nodded and, with a leer that was meant to be sly, touched his hand significantly upon the butt of his revolver.

"I see, it's business. No talkin' about it aforehand, no blabbin' on it arter. A shot or a twist o' the wrist that kin handle a bowie, an' down he goes. Done." Count me an' Matt in. We're pards on all sich."

"No danger of *your* flinching, I hope."

"Don't rile me with sich a ring to yer vice. We ain't them kind. Take us even right down among the ghosts o' Devil's Canyon, an' you'll find us thar."

"Devil's Canyon," said Roscaro. "And whereabouts may that be?"

"One of the eyes, so to speak, of it, lies almost afore ye now. This yere trail mout lead yer inter it. Perhaps that's the pint ye'r aimin' at." Tell us right now, in the go-off through, about whar he's hid, an' how long you think'll last the doin' ov it?"

"It's a woman."

As Roscaro said these words he had his glance fixed keenly upon the face of the man with whom he was talking. The look that came upon it was something surprising. It was not fear, it was not hesitancy, it was not repugnance. It was rather the compulsory revealing of an awe and the knowledge of a mystery that was not understood.

"By Heaven! but you is stalkin' our game!" came the ringing words of the desperado.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HANK MEYERS TAKES WATER.

WHILE the four men were thus conversing, just when Sonora Sam had broken out with the exclamation that closed the preceding chapter, Matt Horne's restless, roving eyes and acute ears caused him to discover

that some one was approaching. Without hesitation or delay he called the attention of the rest to the fact, and when Roscaro followed up the line of the silently pointing finger he recognized or thought he recognized in the approaching horseman, Hank Meyers.

There seemed, however, to be something about this Hank Meyers different from the Hank Meyers whom he had parted from but an hour or two before. As he came nearer he exhibited every outward token of a man who had lately gone through a thrashing machine. His clothing, albeit of the stoutest of new material, was rent and torn, hanging in great streams around him, while the jaunty, broad-brimmed sombrero, which had ornamented his head, was gone altogether. One arm seemed to hang almost powerless by his side, and he sat in his saddle, with a loose, uncertain seat, totally at variance with his usual firm, upright style.

Without hesitation, Meyers rode up to the little group and gave to all a sweeping sort of nod. There was a frown upon his brow, though whether born of rage or pain it was hard at the moment to say. He paid no further attention to the rest of the party, but planting himself directly in front of his employer, in a low, thick voice he exclaimed:

"Pard, I pass!"

"Time you was passin'!" exclaimed Sonora Sam. "What the bloody blazes hev yer been a-doin'?"

"Playin' my keerds—an' luck's ag'in' me. I'll hold out now, an' start on the back track soon ez I'm able to travel."

"In the name of Heaven, what have you met?" now interposed Roscaro, a little recovered from his astonishment. "Is there danger? What has caused this terrible plight?"

"Hold hard a bit, an' take it all easy. I hain't met a grizzly er painter er catamount. It warn't wild Injuns er tame. 'Twasn't ary thing partic'lar. Only jist a little, yaller-haired gal."

Having said this much he paused again, as if for reflection, and after a moment, to allow the information to fairly settle itself in the minds of his auditory, he added, in a contemplative manner:

"But she war lightnin'."

"It was your rifle, then, that we heard? You saw the girl—and missed her?"

Meyers hung his head in silence. He had some little pride, and it had received a shock. He had his private reasons for believing that he had acted with meanness, and consequently felt ashamed to say anything in his defense.

"Come now, pard," said Sam of Sonora, moving up closer. "Tell us all about it. We're dyin' to know the natur' of the she-male that cut yer eye-teeth fur you in sich handsome style."

"Yes, speak up," ordered, rather than requested, Roscaro.

Caballos, as usual, said nothing, but his great black eyes spoke volumes of curiosity.

"Tain't much to tell you. When I left, an' sent yer on ahead, I thort I'd take a little gallop into the foot-hills, an' explore what seemed like a small kenyon, or gorge. It war an easy ride, an' I thort, ez I went along, thet it looked ez though I warn't the fust thet hed follered thet trail."

"Arter a time the kenyon, all on a sudden, opened out into a pocket. Trees war scattered around loose, an' under one on 'em I came suddenly on the female cattymount."

Here Meyers paused in his story as though he considered that he had gone far enough. Sonora Sam looked at him with a disgusted look and growled out:

"Well?"

"Well, thet's about all. Ez I sed, I see'd her thar, an' thinkin' to be friendly like, an' at the same time keepin' an eye to biz., I accosted her perlutely an' got bluffed fur my pains. I war in a pickle then. Ef it hed bin a man, now, 'twould 'a' bin plain sailin', jist a case o' pull an' let go. A woman's deerferent, though. They say a man ez kills weemen in cold blood is haunted allers, an' I shouldn't wonder ef it war so. I talked a leetle peert an' sassy, perhaps, ez a man may when he's riled, an' offered to share with her our camp, free o' charge. All of which didn't suit. When I got more pressin' with my invitation, goin' so fur ez to advance to

offer her my arm, she got up on her left ear immediate, an' told me to git. I didn't perpose to git, so she got me."

"And how did she so completely demolish your wardrobe, in so short a time? What weapons did she use to do you the grievous bodily injury, that seems to be putting you in so much pain at the present time?"

"I'll tell you how it war. I stepped up closer an' closer; she keepin' movin' back slowly an' slower. I allow she warned me fair an' squar', an' ef I suffered it war my own fault. Jist as I grabbed fur her arm she clapped her hands together twice, with a sounding slap. The next minnit the devil hed me."

"The devil!" exclaimed Matt Horne, with a tremor in his voice that did not pass unnoticed by the rest of the audience.

"Yaas, the devil—in the shape of a great brown mustang, with blazed face. She clapped her hands, ez I war sayin', twice. Then ez my hand touched her shoulder she leaped sideways an' called: 'Starlight! Starlight!' Thet's about all I remember c'rectly. He caught me by the back of the neck: he bit me; he churned me; he shook me. When I dropped on the ground he put his one foot on the small of my back and ripped my coat into slithers with his mouth. An' the durned cuss war only playin' with me all the time. He hurt a little, to be sure, but ef she'd 'a' said a word he'd 'a' tore me limb from limb in the shake of a goat's tail. I fired jist one shot, thet went floatin' skywards—thet's the time my arm got hurt. She almost broke it strikin' the blow up, arter the churnin' hed gone on fur a longer time than war at all convenient er agreeable; she speaks low to the mustang, who stopped his worryin', but kept a tight hold on what little war left o' my coat."

"Trapper, hunter, outlaw, er whatever ye may be, I don't want to have bloodshed, an' so I'll let up ef you say ye'r willin' to leave me to myself. Tell me that I shall be safe in allowing you to do so and you may go in peace."

"I took her at her word, you bet. I crawled back to my hoss where I had hitched him—an' he war a'most dead o' fright himself. I climbed up into the saddle, an' war about to set off ez fast ez I could, when she called to me to wait a moment. Then she gathered up my pop-guns jist ez I hed left 'em scattered on the ground, and handed 'em up to me without any more flinchin' er fear then I'd feel lookin' inter the eyes of a three-weeks-old bufler calf. She war safe, though. Thar warn't no shoot left in me. Thar ain't none now. Take the buck an' ante yerself. I jump the game an' leave the board. No more on it in mine!"

That Hank Meyers, who had the blood of a dozen white men, and countless Indians, upon his hands, should fail him, never once had entered the mind of Roscaro. At this second defection he was more angered than surprised, and the stormy manner in which he replied to this announcement might, at another time, have drawn the wrath of Meyers down upon him in fatal haste. That he had been suddenly and deeply moved was patent to all.

In vain Pierre Roscaro stormed. Hank turned to Sonora Sam to answer.

"Sam, I've knowd yer fur years. Ye'r a rattlin' bu'ster an' nine alligators on a sand-bar; but don't yer do it. Ef every hair on her head was strung from eend to eend with gold doubloons, I wouldn't tetch her. Take warnin', all on yer. Ez the young feller jist out on his grave the other night said: 'Thar's death an' danger ahead—an' it ain't fur her. Coaxin' nor force won't move me now. I've give my honest word, an' I'm goin' on the back track. The five hundred gold pieces you may give to Sonora Sam—I'll go back to look fur Larry Delain.'"

Was this suddenly arising cowardice upon the part of his employees an epidemic? Or was it, rather, a warning, an impress made by some strange, mysterious power, upon minds not naturally impressible, for the purpose of warning him back from the murderous purpose upon which he was now fully resolved.

In some such way thought Roscaro; but he had no time given him to further reason with Hank Meyers, since with his last words

that worthy had deliberately wheeled his horse, and began slowly but resolutely to retrace his steps.

"Dare we let that man go back? Dare we leave him living?"

Such were the thoughts of Roscaro, and with a sudden impulse he seized and cocked the carbine which hung convenient at his shoulder, determined to cause Hank Meyers to promise to remain with them, or to take his life then and there, for he felt that he would be a dangerous enemy against him in the future, if allowed to go free then.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ROSCARO THWARTED.

For a moment after Hank Meyers had turned and set his face upon the back track, his life was in danger. Whatever may have been his past crimes, whatever even his present deserts, the cruel, cowardly shot in the back, which Pierre Roscaro then meditated, would have been a harsh stroke for one who had just paused and turned away from a great temptation to evil.

For just one moment; then the question of his life or death hung trembling in the balance—and it was Sonora Sam that turned the scale on the side of life. He was standing at the head of Roscaro's horse, and caught on the instant the full intent of his foul purpose. As the carbine's muzzle moved in the direction of the retreating trapper, Sonora Sam seized the bridle of Pierre Roscaro's horse near the bit, and with one sweep of his powerful arm, brought it first back upon its haunches and then half-way round.

"Hold hard thar!" he exclaimed, presenting at the same time a revolver with his left hand. "Hank Meyers may be too big now fur the game ye'd fly him at, but he saved my ha'r more ner onc't, an' ain't goin' under till that little debt's paid. Drop that, an' come down!"

"Curse them all for a pack of greedy, cowardly coyotes. They drop away from me at first sight of the yellow-haired vixen! That man knows too much to go back to the settlements now. I may as well kill you and go hang myself."

The face of the man was white with rage as he spoke, and he glared upon the others with a look that was dangerous.

Sonora Sam was as cool as an iceberg on the north side of the Arctic circle. He loosened his hold on the bridle, dropped the muzzle of his weapon, and carelessly turned away. The attention of Roscaro had been diverted to himself, his debt to Meyers had been paid in that rude way, and now he was at ease.

"Hardly, my friend. When yer want to die, do it game, with yer boots on an' makin' a stiff fight ez long as fightin's any ust. Ez fur Meyers, don't trouble yerself, he's stanch."

"Ef he's passed out his hand he'll make no chin music around the board. To-day ain't the first I've sec'd him. Now, it's time we were turnin' inter camp an' makin' this leetle matter plain and straight."

"Perhaps it is as you say. At all events, it is too late now to act differently."

"Meyers has gone, and may Satan go with him. I am in a tangled web; lead on and see if you can help me through."

The very movement that seemed so displeasing to Pierre Roscaro perhaps was, in reality the means of the salvation of the party. As they gave a last glance in the direction which the defecting guide had taken, they were surprised to see him come suddenly into view once more. Far away to the South he flashed into sight, from behind the mountain curve which had hidden him. He was riding at a flying run, evidently making for cover upon the opposite side of the valley.

At this sight, instantly there was a commotion excited in the little party. The change from apathy to activity was certainly not brought about without a cause. Meyers had been revitalized, and with the knowledge of that there seemed to come a scent of danger upon the light breeze which was sweeping up the valley.

"He's a game one!" was the involuntary tribute of Matt Horne. "He sees danger an' lets us know, but he won't hark back to the kiver he's once draw'd out from."

"No foolin' Matt, till we get hoss-flesh atween our legs ag'in. Thar's diffikilty afore us, an' danger ahind."

As he spoke Sonora Sam dashed into the bushes from whence he and his comrade had made their approach; the others following without a moment's delay.

A few moments only were necessary to prepare the two men.

The four then moved slowly northward, casting anxious looks behind.

Possibly five minutes had elapsed from the time when Meyers had been seen, riding eastward. From a position of vantage, where it was possible to see without being seen, a careful survey of the valley was taken, and as they looked there darted into their circle of vision a line of dark forms, evidently pursuing the course so lately taken by Meyers.

"Thar they be," said Horne. "Dod rotted, thievin', murderin' Comanche. They's runnin' the trail hard but ain't sighted him yet. He hed the bulge on 'em an' hez took kiver. Lord, ain't they on it hot?"

The dozen Indians swept away out of sight in a moment, but it was only to give place to as many more, who advanced at a more leisurely pace, their course tending directly along the foot-hills. They were indeed upon the exact trail of Roscaro and his comrades and doubtless those first seen had detached themselves from the party at the sight of the spot where the returning track of Meyers turned away to the east.

"I b'leve," said Sonora Sam, "thet the varmints hez a white pris'ner in the lead, and if so, thar is work fer us ter do."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

PUT TO FLIGHT.

It was now almost sundown. A few more moments and Pierre Roscaro and the three men in league with him, would be, for the present, in comparative safety. That the Comanches had seen and followed his trail Roscaro well knew, and it behooved him to take some method, during the coming night, of throwing them off the scent.

The fact that a white man, held under some restraint, but evidently leading the Indians, was to be seen, did not appear at all remarkable. Doubtless this was the same band that had surprised the two whites a few nights before. If so the prisoner which they then took was still in their hands.

Pierre Roscaro cared little for the fate of this prisoner, but a great deal for the chance which led him in that direction. These Indians so inopportunely presenting themselves, were driving him away from the spot where he knew, from the report of Meyers, but an hour ago, was encamped the girl of whom he was in quest. If he lost her now it might be some time before he would be able again to find her, especially with the country swarming with hostile red-skins.

Nevertheless, needs must, when the king of darkness drives. With as much haste as was compatible with care they wound their way backward, keeping carefully under cover and blessing the darkness which was so rapidly settling around them.

They reached the spot where a side trail appeared winding its way into the heart of the mountainous region upon their left. Roscaro pointed to it, and suggested to Sonora Sam, who had naturally taken the position of leader, that they follow it.

That worthy shook his head: "Not any fur me—leastwise at night. There's a road into Devil's Canyon an' I want none in mine. Hold on! We'll go forra'ds till we lose the trail in the hard ground ahead, an' then we'll double back on 'em."

"Hark, what is that?" interposed Caballos, at the same time extending his hand toward the thread-like path that they could faintly discern.

A faintly-heard, far-off, cry was heard away up in the somber recesses. It was the single howl of a wolf.

Again the sound was repeated.

"Nat'ral," said Matt Horne. "Comes from a wolf, or the ghost o' one; but what's the use to listen up thar? The noises that live in them mountains 'd make yer blood crawl to hear. The boys told me about 'em long ago, an' me an' my pards in three days an' nights—specially the nights—hes heerd enough to scare out a boar-grizzly with a cottonwood tail. Listen! thar it goes ag'in."

"Singular," said Roscaro. "It seems to be answered in the very direction from whence we came."

"You bet. Every skulkin' thing thet looks like a wolf, from a prairie kiote to a timber gray, will be takin' the sound up."

While Matt spoke they heard the sweeping gallop of a horse, heading directly toward them. They heard, moreover, shouts and yells, and the sound of discharging firearms.

In the dim twilight they saw the approaching rider spring into sight and bear down upon the very spot where they stood.

Roscaro looked on in amazement. He thought he recognized the great mustang which so rapidly spurned the ground behind him. He thought, too, that in the darkness he could distinguish that the form of the rider was lithe and slender. *Florence, of Devil's Canyon, was before him.*

In the full tide of this belief he raised his carbine to his shoulder and fired.

At the very moment that the leaden messenger started on its deadly mission, Florence—for she it was—turned, by the merest wave of her hand, her steed sharply to the left. It was done through no premonition of danger, yet it happened to be her salvation, for untouched she dashed away in the new direction, never even turning her head to see whence was the shot, which hurtled harmlessly past her head.

With a double stroke of the hand Roscaro recharged his carbine, and was about to try a second shot at the now rapidly vanishing woman. Had he done so, perhaps his murderous intents would have been then and there consummated by the act.

But, however deep the envy, hatred or avarice which was moving him to this dark deed, self-preservation was stronger, and the continued shouts and yells warned him that the Comanches were drawing nearer than was compatible with safety for himself and his comrades.

"You've did it now," hoarsely whispered Sonora Sam. "They've sighted us sure an' will give us a right sharp chase, an' a middlin' fair sprinklin' of a fou't. Come on now!"

The men wheeled at once. Pierre Roscaro would have rushed for the entering Pass to Devil's Canyon had he been the one to direct their line of retreat, but Sonora Sam refused to be guided into what might well prove a *cul-de-sac*, from which there would be no means of escape save cutting there way out through besieging red-skins.

To the north then they dashed—with a score of Comanches in full cry upon their trail, like a pack of hungry wolves.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE LONELY CABIN.

HART HAZEL without hesitation proceeded to follow his young conductor, who seemed to take his presence as a matter of course. His sponsors, the wolves, had performed their introduction, and now remained behind, ready to attend to other duties.

Although somewhat strengthened by the assurance of speedy ministrations to his physical wants, he was yet so weak, so weary, that the journey seemed almost interminable. Up hill and down, through forest and glade, they strode for full half an hour, and then suddenly they came upon a bare and stony neck of mountain, on the one side of which lay Devil's Canyon. On the other side, at the bottom of a gentle slope, was a beautiful basin or park, dotted with clumps of timber and divided by the silver thread of a single winding stream, which glittered softly in the light of the setting sun.

At length his guide halted for a moment. He gazed with a fixed and earnest look into his face, and said:

"Your name?"

"Hart Hazel."

"Your purpose in coming here?"

"No evil one, I assure you. I left St. Louis for the Overland journey to Santa Fe. Two of us separated from the train, and after a weary journey upon the desert, were attacked by Indians. What became of my companion I know not. I was left for dead, though why left, I cannot tell. Probably some one came to my rescue, and having hastily buried my supposed corpse in a shallow grave, pressed on in pursuit of the Indians. I remember coming out from my sepulcher, and then there was a blank for hours, perhaps days. See, there is the mark of a blow upon my head, here is the gash in my clothing where a knife made its mark through and upon my breast. The wolves drew me from my tomb, and almost the first sight that greeted my eyes upon the restoration of my senses was the wolves once more. They drew me on, they led me. I know them, and they know me. The one who tamed and taught them, taught them well. I do not wish to pry, I do not wish to intrude; yet, after my pressing needs are satisfied, I wish to ask a question or two of the one who sent them to my assistance. If there is danger—"

"Haste! haste! Save her! save her!"

The words broke in upon the thread of the young man's story, and he stared wildly around. Twice before had he heard the same cracked voice, uttering the same earnest ejaculation—once in his slumbers by the camp-fire, but that time it was in a dream. Once again in the lonely camp on the desert march—then he fancied it a phantom, or the creation of an overstrung imagination.

"Yes, I will save her!" he cried, fiercely, shaking his clinched fist. "Unarmed, weak, dying though I seem, I will save her!"

As Hazel thus shouted, with his eyes fixed upward, his form quivering with emotion, his voice gradually grew fainter, till the last words came in a compressed whisper. Then his too severely tried nerves and body together gave way, and he fell senseless at the feet of his listener.

The boy seemed alarmed. Perhaps conscience smote him because he had dallied with one sorely needing help. With a strength far beyond his seeming years, he dragged Hart Hazel away from the spot. He tugged and toiled until the perspiration broke out in great beads upon his forehead, and, at length, by almost superhuman exertions, brought him to the doorway of a little cabin which lay concealed from sight in a carefully chosen location.

Here, for a moment, he left him, and passed within the cabin, but soon reappeared. He moistened the lips and brow of the unconscious young man, sprinkled his face, and finally appeared overjoyed to observe signs of returning animation.

The process of returning from stupor to actual life was slow. For a time Hart Hazel lay weak and motionless. He watched his self-constituted nurse with a wandering air; not certain, apparently, of the reality of anything around him.

The boy was equal to the emergency. Noiselessly, yet rapidly, he prepared a tempting dish of food from a larder well stocked with meat, and slowly and with care fed the young man, who was as weak as a child.

Color came back to the cheeks of Hart Hazel, and his strength revived with a rapidity as pleasurable as it was unexpected. He drew in life renewed and intensified. He said little, but ate a great deal—at intervals.

By and by he raised himself up and looked around him.

He found himself in a cabin of some kind. From the appearances of the opposite side he judged it was divided into two or more apartments; and from a noise that he suddenly heard in that direction his belief seemed doubtless correct. He could distinguish the sounds made by some one just awakening from slumber.

The boy was absent from the room just now, and Hazel was alone. As he looked upon a curtain of skins, it was suddenly swept away and in the doorway then revealed there stood a woman.

CHAPTER XL. THE MANIAC.

For a moment the rather weakly beating heart of Hart Hazel stood still, at the sight of a woman before him in that strange place. Then the strokes again came regular and full. This was not the phantom of his dream.

"Who are you?" was the salutation of the woman, as her glance fell upon the young man, and in her tone there was a slight foreign accent.

Hazel's eyes had dropped at the first, but he lifted them again and gazed fixedly upon his questioner.

Under his scrutiny her glance moved uneasily, and at length broke down. Springing to the outside door, she eagerly called:

"Charles, Charles!"

Immediately there came the response of:

"Here, mother," and the boy almost instantly appeared by her side, as she turned to again face Hart Hazel.

The relationship of the two was patent at a glance, the same sloe-black eyes and midnight hair, the same general contour of face belonged to both. Yet in the eyes of the mother there gleamed a light which, now that it shone full upon Hazel, sent a chill through his bones. He understood well the singular feeling which had possessed him at first sight, and the strange reluctance to speak. The woman before him was undoubtedly mad.

"Who is this man and where did he come from?"

As she spoke, the woman pointed a finger bony and shapely, at Hazel.

"It is a young man who was guided here by the wolves, who I believe were sent to his aid by Florence. He had been wounded and left for dead. Even now he fainted away and I feared much that he would die under my hands. Believe me, mother, he is a true man."

"Ay, true, perhaps, until tempted! Tell me, young man, have you in your wandering seen Hugh Davis, a fair-haired young man of about your own age? Perhaps he has even been a comrade of yours. Tell me truly, pray!"

The voice of the woman was of a tone the most mournful. Tinged by a slight foreign accent the words, nevertheless, fell with a gentle sweetness upon the ear.

Hart Hazel shook his head with a regretful movement.

"No, lady, no such youth have I known. Others by the name of Davis I have met; but none bearing the name of Hugh. Would that I could bring you good news of one that must be near and dear to you."

"You speak falsely, sir," suddenly responded the woman, her mood and voice changing instantly. "I know your voice and tone—I have heard you in my dreams. You come to steal away my treasures." "But you shall not. Even if I have to violate all laws of hospitality, and lay you dead by my own hand across my own threshold."

"Indeed you are mistaken. My intentions are to help rather than to harm."

"No falsehood to me. You were with Hugh Davis but a short time ago. You slept by the

same camp-fire, rode upon the same trail. You are here; but where, where is he?"

"Do not wrong me," responded Hazel, speaking earnestly. "The comrade of a few days ago is indeed missing, but not through wish or fault of mine. Whether he is living or dead I cannot indeed say. If the latter, none mourns his death more sincerely than myself."

"He is dead then! Merciful Heaven, he comes and tells me to my face that he is dead!"

"No, no! I do not say that. Form no such idea. I believe indeed that he was taken prisoner by the very Indians who so nearly deprived me of my life; but he may—may I might say, must have escaped. His was an old head. He knew every trick and wile by which savage deviltry can be baffled, and long ere this, he has given them the slip, and returned to a safer country."

"Returned! Left me? No, never! My own noble, bright-eyed Hugh would risk all dangers and remain. He would feel the presence of his dear ones and stretch out his arms to them to greet them after the weary night of waiting in danger. Where then is Florence? Why has she not gone out to meet him, and face it with him? I will go myself. Hugh, get me ready; help me. See, I, the weak woman, wasted by years of weary waiting, will go now to meet my faithful Hugh."

"Pardon me, madam, but pray be composed. The comrade of whom I spoke can not be the Hugh of whom you speak. He was a much older man than my myself, a man past fifty years; nor was his name Hugh, but simply Burt. He was a Texan, a borderman, and the guide of the train with which I started out from St. Louis."

"It was my Hugh, it was my Hugh, for I heard his voice in my dreams—and I heard yours. If you are the true man you profess yourself to be, go get you forth to meet him. Save him from his enemies, protect him from all dangers and bring him back here to me. Haste, then, and save him."

"Haste! haste! save her! save her!"

The sound of the curiously cracking voice broke in upon the stillness that followed the last appeal of the crazed woman. Hart Hazel heard it for the first time without a thrill of superstitious terror. He now recognized the nature of the speaker. A large parrot came fluttering down from some unknown recess and seated itself upon the shoulder of the woman, at the same time that, through the open door there bounded the three wolves, who leaped and fawned around her, as if to express joy at the meeting.

An angry look came across the face of the woman. With a frown, a shake of the head and a scream she shouted:

"No! no! no! She is safe, no danger can harm her—it is he that is to be saved. Go now and keep the promise to me!"

But again the parrot screamed, and this time more shrilly, as if furious at meeting with contradiction.

"Haste! haste! haste! Save her! save her! save her!"

A sudden paroxysm of rage fell upon the woman. She clutched madly at the neck of the bird, which eluded her grasp and flew away, when it took refuge in a tree and gave utterance to a mocking, tantalizing laugh. Then with rapid fury she snatched up a cudgel and belaboring the wolves, drove them from the house.

Hazel had already fled the scene. He knew not what to do, and so, at a sign from the boy, who seemed to take the whole as a matter of course, he passed out into the open air.

For a moment he left behind him a frantic maniac who raved with wild laughter and shrieks. Without, his company was but little better, since the three pets seated themselves at a little distance from the door, and in unison uttered a long-drawn, mournful howl.

Doubtless the boy had acquired a fund of nerve from familiarity with such scenes. Hazel heard for a few moments his calm, low voice. Then the noisy demonstrations gave place to a fit of frenzied weeping which lasted for a short time. After that there was silence within the little cabin home.

Just at this time, while he stood thoughtful, doubting, perplexed, there came to his ears the sound of a single rifle-shot, evidently fired somewhere in, or near, the line of the pathway he had traveled but a short time before.

At this the boy came out and looked anxiously around, as though expecting some one, or dreading danger, which, Hart Hazel did not know.

CHAPTER XLI.

A SINGULAR CONTRACT.

It is now probably time, in the mind of the reader at least, that we go back and see what has become of Burt Davis, the comrade of Hart Hazel upon this weird and singular expedition.

It will be remembered that just at the time when Larry Delain and the others charged out from the timber line to the rescue of the two men the Comanches had succeeded in unhorsing Hart Hazel and Davis, and in the panic succeeding the charge, the Indians had still presence of mind enough to perceive that he was neither

dead nor mortally wounded, and to cast him upon a mustang and bear him away as a prisoner.

When Davis came to his senses once more the fight, with the Indians, was about over. They had halted and were debating what disposition to make of their prisoner, and whether it would be safe or prudent to retrace their footsteps and attempt to avenge themselves upon those who had put them to such ignominious flight.

For a time Davis felt that his life was in imminent danger; that it would be ultimately sacrificed if he remained in their hands he had not a shadow of a doubt; but a little delay was worth more to him just then than a fortune. With delay there might be a chance for escape; and escape was the first thought that presented itself to his mind upon opening his eyes again to the world.

The more desperate of the braves seemed about to carry the day. The faces of all were set alternately toward Davis and toward the north. Would they brain him at once, or would they leave him there under a guard?

With angry exclamations four or five weapons were poised—a moment more, and the troubles of Burt Davis, for this world, at least, would have been ended.

So intent were the Comanches upon settling this question that for a few moments they had neither eyes or ears for anything else, and their habitual caution was forgotten.

But Davis was not destined to die thus. At the very moment when hope was deserting him, what was his surprise to see an Indian of majestic size and appearance bound before the group which surrounded him, and sweeping away the weapon of the nearest and most active of the braves, stand surveying the party with a look of mingled anger and scorn.

Instantly the noise and turmoil ceased. Obedient to a gesture the raised arms were lowered, the brandished weapons put aside, and a silence dropped upon all. The white man knew that his life, for a time at least, was safe.

The chief who arrived so opportunely seemed in no good humor with his warriors. In short, sharp tones he gave a few brief directions and immediate return toward the scene of the late conflict was peremptorily forbidden, and the steps of the band were turned back to the shade of the timber, when Davis soon found himself seated, securely bound, but otherwise well treated. Closely guarded, but otherwise apparently unnoticed, Davis remained for an hour or more, when the chief approached him, and silently scanned his face. Impassible, and without a single change of feature, it was difficult to see any effect produced upon him by the operation.

At length, in a low and guarded tone he spoke:

"What does the white man do here on the desert trails of the great plain?"

"Who is he, and where does he come from?"

The ease with which the Indian spoke, and the nature of his queries were sufficient at once to stamp him as one who had had frequent intercourse with the whites. Doubtless he had some of the rudiments of education in his savage nature.

Thoroughly surprised as Davis was, he did not hesitate to answer immediately:

"Two of us were on the Santa Fe trail and were lost on the desert. Just as we were hoping that our troubles were over, your braves fell upon us without warning. My friend is dead, and I am a prisoner."

"The white man talks very sweet now; but he forgets to tell how many of my warriors fell at his hands. What does he suppose will be done to him?"

"If your warriors had not attacked us we should not have troubled them, you may be sure. Whatever may be my fate I hope to meet it like a man. You have the power, use it as you see fit."

"The white men were not on the Santa Fe trail, and they were not children to be lost on the desert. They were thieves and robbers who had no business upon these hunting-grounds. They are of the wicked white men who have plundered the Comanches and driven them to the war-path, for revenge, and to recover what they have lost. The white man shall die."

"Quite likely I shall die, red-man; but let me tell you that it is years since I was on this trail, and that I have not harmed you or yours. There may be thieves and outlaws—there generally are along the border; but I am not of that stamp."

"Then tell to Hailstorm what you were doing here, where it is bad for white or red to be found alone."

"I have told you. We started for Santa Fe, and were drawn off from the trail by—a dream."

"The white man's eyes speak the truth, the same as his tongue; perhaps it is so. Will the white man aid his red brother if his life is spared to him?"

"Do you want me to turn my hand against my own race? No! a thousand times no! I can die first."

"Ah, the white man is one of the outlaws. If he was a true man he would help any one even a Comanche, who had been robbed."

"Hold, right there, chief. Against robbers and outlaws, who have no right upon their side I could turn, especially to save my life. But why should the Comanches ask my aid? Can the assistance of one white man be worth enough, to cause your people to forego their revenge?"

"If so Hailstorm orders. Does the white man know this country?"

"Yes, so far as it has not changed in the course of years."

"And the rocks and mountains of Devil's Canyon, as your people call it?"

"I was the first white man that set foot there, but that was years ago."

"Then the white man may guide us and aid us. Believe the words of Hailstorm. The Comanche is a child of the open plain. He can use the lance, or bow, or long rifle upon horseback; but upon foot, in the mountains he is a child. And to the mountains the robbers have gone. Serve Hailstorm, then, and show that you are a true heart, and Hailstorm gives his word your scalp shall be safe."

"If Hailstorm will trust Burt Davis, he will find his heart is whiter than his face. If I find that I cannot aid you, then I will tell you so, and you may work your will."

Hailstorm, the chief, extended his hand, into which Davis dropped a ready palm. In sincere good faith, at least on the side of Davis, this singular contract was made.

And thus it happened that after some devious wanderings, we find him approaching Devil's Canyon, half trusted, half feared; nominally free, yet under constant surveillance.

CHAPTER XLII.

WHAT HAZEL MET IN DEVIL'S CANYON.

HART HAZEL seated himself to wait for the storm within the cabin to blow over. That he had so far met with remarkable coincidences with the main outline of his most singular dream, was certainly true; and now he was certain that he was near the fruition of the hopes which had led him upon this reckless adventure. He doubted not that he should soon see the face of his dream, and he nerved himself, as he sat there, immersed in thought, for the supreme effort which seemed to him to be near at hand.

The door of the hut opened and the boy appeared, with his finger upraised, as if to demand silence. At that time it was that both heard suddenly and quite plainly the report of a rifle in the distance.

The twilight was upon them, but for all that Hazel could see the boy start at the sound. He knew himself that it must mean something, and was immediately on the tenter-hooks of apprehension. He whispered:

"I am utterly defenseless—have you arms that you could furnish me?"

By way of answer the boy disappeared for a moment, and when he reappeared he held in his hand a belt from which swung a knife and revolver.

Hazel seized the weapons with an exclamation of joy, and belted them around his waist. The boy stood at his side and whispered into his ear:

"Think you there is danger? Who, think you, fired that shot, and at whom? We have never fired a rifle in this region for years."

"I know not who may be approaching, but I will go and find out, and return soon and apprise you," said Hart Hazel.

Without delay the young man passed away. He strode up the hillside, passed the bare neck of land and hastened through the sheltering and concealing timber, until he reached the very spot at which he turned from the ascending pathway.

Here he paused a short time and listened. He heard behind him the footsteps of animals, which he judged to be the wolf-scouts. They followed at an uncertain gait, as if not really apprised of their duty. In time they approached near enough to be plainly visible, and Hazel gave one hasty look over his shoulder to see if their appearance was amicable.

A glance was satisfactory. They were watching the road through the pass, but from time to time they gave him an appealing look as if for orders. He had none to give, however. The sounds below came less distinctly than ever and he knew that the tide of battle, if battle there was, rolled away toward the north. A scattering cry or two that came faintly to his ears convinced him that there were Indians upon the trail of some one who fled. Should he go down? was the question that now agitated his mind. While he listened and looked, uncertain what to do, like a blast of wind, a horse and rider swept by along the pathway before him.

The sounds died away rapidly, and with them the wolves also disappeared. Then Hazel went too. He cared nothing for the trouble below—the trouble was here. In the rider flitting by he was certain that he had recognized a female form, and he followed cautiously but rapidly on her trail. He knew not what might lay before and above him—what of danger to him or to her, but without hesitation he went.

A few yards were taken in the apparent roadway before the young man noticed that thus he

was thrown into the light, while above him all was impenetrable.

All caution had not deserted Hazel. When he observed this fact, he dashed to one side and ran on in the shadow.

He saw nothing, heard nothing, and in five minutes more was a bound, helpless and despairing prisoner.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE BANDIT BAND.

ACROSS prairies, through valley, canyon, and over mountains, a band of horsemen were pursuing their way.

They were well-mounted, their horses, though rough looking, being animals of speed and endurance.

The men were over a score in number, and they were all armed with rifles, revolvers, and bowie-knife, with one exception—their leader.

He carried no rifle.

All were dressed in buckskin leggings, high top-boots, woolen shirts, and sombreros, and at the back of each saddle was a leather pouch for provisions and a blanket rolled tightly and strapped close. Lariats hung at their saddle-horns, and the men looked like a mixture of American, Mexican, and Indian.

A wilder, more reckless set of men were seldom seen together, and their deeds of desperation had been such that their chief was proud of them.

He seemed cast in a different mold.

He was without doubt an American, but he was attired in the costume of a Mexican caballero.

His saddle and bridle were of the finest workmanship, and were weighted down with the gold and silver money that ornamented them.

His revolvers were of the best pattern and gold-mounted, and a short sword, with gemmed hilt, hung at his belt instead of a bowie knife.

His face was as stern as a Roman's, and the eyes were piercing and even restless.

He was not a young man, for he was bordering on fifty years, and his hair was even gray; but his form was erect, his carriage youthful, and he seemed to be the possessor of great strength and endurance.

Where he was leading them his men did not know.

He was an outlaw, and had been such for a score of years, dividing his time between Mexico and Texas.

It was said by some that he was worth a vast fortune, saved from his robberies for years, and others were wont to state that he gave all that he thus illegally got to objects of charity.

A large price, in Texas and Mexico, was upon his head, dead or alive, and yet he seemed to have no dread of his foes.

He ruled his band with an iron hand, and it was said of him that scores of men had been slain by his act and his command.

He had called his men together and ordered them to follow him.

They had prepared for a long march also, by his orders.

Leaving their mountain retreat in Mexico, he had led them across the Rio Grande and toward the country of the Texan Comanches.

His destination was to the neighborhood of the Devil's Canyon, and for some reason known only to himself, he was invading that land so shunned by hunters.

When at last the country was reached, which the outlaw leader sought, he turned to his band and said:

"Men, for long years I have tried to solve two mysteries, tried to follow two trails to the end."

"Friendship has prompted me in the one case, hate in the other."

"It has come to me that in the neighborhood of Devil's Canyon, in this country where now we are, dwell those that have sought a refuge here, and it having been so found out by one who is their life-long foe, he has sent his tools here to kill and destroy them, for his gain will be great thereby."

"When I have met him, I may have appeared his friend."

"I am his foe, and I shall thwart him in his devilish work."

"I am here for that purpose."

"His men are here as spies, to find out all they can for their leader, and those men I seek to get into my power, and you must aid me."

"You now know why I am here, and I expect your obedience in all things."

"The man who refuses to obey in any order that I may give, let him step out of the ranks now."

Not a man moved, and after waiting for full a minute, to see if he had one in his band who cared to disobey him, he turned his horse and once more took the lead, penetrating further into the wild fastnesses of the mountain, where his men wondered that he dared to go, so strange and weird were the stories told around the campfires, of the country about the Devil's Canyon.

That outlaw leader was he that had once been an honored soldier of the American Army in Mexico, and whom the treachery of a friend had made an outlaw, *Don Cantrella, once Henry Kenton*.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MOUNTED AND ARMED.

"STRING him up!"

At the sound of that brief, stern order from the man who here represented supreme authority, the twenty men who clustered around Hart Hazel fell back a little, leaving him, with his two guards the center of a circle.

"A rope and a swing. The fellow is a spy and shall meet a spy's fate! Away with him to the nearest tree!"

With an unerring aim some one from the edge of the circle cast a running noose, which coiled around Hazel's neck, leaving the long lasso stretching away in fantastic curves.

A man stepped out and raised the rope from the ground, and commenced coiling it over his arm, preparatory to the departure for the nearest tree, while a dozen voices echoed the sentence:

"Yes, he is a spy and a spy's death he must have. Hang him! hang him!"

Hart Hazel knew not into what hands he had fallen, save that they were rough and desperate men.

In a few brief moments he had been taken, tried and condemned. At first he attempted to assuage the hostility of the men around him; but one trial satisfied him that he had no chance for success.

His self-possession did not desert him. Though he would have held on to life if possible, he had after all, but little really to bind him to this world, and his pride forbade that he should quail before the outlaws, who now, in sudden frenzy, demanded his life. They would have booted at his prayers even as they now mocked at his dignified silence.

"Away with him!" they shouted. "He it was that killed Rube Dado. He is a spy and informer."

They dragged him to a tree over an extending branch of which they flung the loose end of the lasso.

By one last despairing effort Hart Hazel burst the bonds which fettered his wrists and struck out once, twice, at the two nearest heads.

The men went down, when, with fierce cries, three or four desperate men flung themselves toward him. But a clear, loud voice rung through the gloomy cavern.

"Halt! Hold, there!"

Back from the shadows, as if they were an answering echo, came these three words. A powerful hand grasped Hazel's shoulder, but every eye was at once turned toward the spot where, under the darkness, seemed doubtless to lurk a confederate of the young man in their hands.

Only a dark wall of bare rocks lay before them. Even Hazel himself was startled and perplexed, not knowing whence or why the interruption.

"Desist from that murderous attempt to hang that man or take the consequences. Move hand or foot, and you, Sir Leader, die!" rung out the mysterious voice from the gloom.

In the dead silence there rose to the listening ears a brief, harsh, jarring sound; the click of the hammers of two revolvers drawn back to the full cock.

"I have you covered, and I never miss my aim. Doff your hat, sir! See, next, perhaps, 'twill be yourself that drops."

The sound of a whistle and the crack of a revolver blended together upon the night air. The hat of the outlaw leader, who had but lately pronounced sentence upon the captive, fell to the ground, pierced by a bullet. At the same time, with a clatter and clang of hoofs, a dark mustang, with great, flowing mane and tail, dashed through the circle of astonished outlaws, and up to Hart Hazel's side.

"Ho! The echo of Devil's Canyon! See the flash upon the other side! There—"

"The first man that points a weapon in my direction—he and you die!" came back the clear, defiant tones. At the same time Hart Hazel flung himself upon the back of the mustang, as he leaped, striking down the outlaw who had the hold upon his shoulder with one hand, even as he snatched with the other a revolver from his belt. Mounted and armed, Hart Hazel vanished like a phantom in the shadow.

That the young man thus apparently deserted the courageous friend, who was risking all to save his life, was no fault of his own. The animal under him was one trained to go and come, to fetch and carry. From a colt up it had its daily lessons and learned them well.

Hazel would have wheeled and gone, not in the direction indicated by the singular echo; but rather toward the spot where was seen the flash of the pistol; when he sought to grasp the reins for that purpose, he found none. The animal went at its own good pleasure and he was powerless to stop or guide.

The mustang evidently knew the ground. Almost instantly it was out of sight of the astonished group and dashing through a gloomy gorge, perfectly unknown to the rider. With wonderful sureness of foot it flitted along the rough and dangerous road, spurring the rattling pebbles behind without stay or stumble in the mad race for life.

A man started into the dim vista ahead and challenged the flying rider. That he was a sen-

tinell or vedette, Hazel felt assured, and raised the revolver that he still grasped, determined to use it when a little nearer. He heard a challenge; then, before he knew it, his singular steed was upon the outlaw.

What followed in the next few seconds was a matter for conjecture only. He left behind him a senseless, bleeding corpse, a broad hoof-mark printed upon its livid face.

Onward again, in a mad flight—now through a winding chasm, again through a tree-studded glade. Behind came at last a faint clatter of hoofs, announcing that pursuit had begun; but he feared not for the result so long as his steed continued to retain its speed and intelligence.

At length he debouched upon the plain. Then his horse made a sharp turn to the left and stretched along toward the very spot where Hazel had entered the mountain gate that afternoon.

Whither he was being carried now he knew not; but he thought it time to seek to check the animal, and proceed with more caution. He leaned forward and grasped the flowing mane—but the effort was vain. His progress was still onward.

Something far ahead attracted the attention of the mustang, though it did not check its speed. Following with his eyes the direction of the pointed ears, Hazel thought he saw far ahead of him a number of dark forms, and by instinct he remembered a similar looking line which charged upon Burt Davis and himself a few days before, just at the hour of sunset. He had been buried, then, as a result; he did not wish to run the risk again of a similar catastrophe.

In desperation Hazel leaned forward upon the neck of the mustang until he could reach its jaw. He gave it a sudden wrench and sought in that way to check and turn it to one side. Flight seemed to be called for by the appearance of this new danger.

The mustang had its own sense of duty. At this renewed effort to change its course it gave a mighty bound and then, almost in the air, a sudden leap to the left. The animal went on then after a way of its own choosing, for poor Hazel remained in a confused and crumpled heap where he had been thrown by the sudden leap of the strange animal.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE HUNTRESS AT BAY.

IN the gathering darkness that was closing over the scene, when Comanches charged upon Roscaro and his three companions, Burt Davis judged that it was a good time to attempt an escape. Without much trouble he dropped, at the first favorable moment, from his mustang to the ground, and then darted into the shades which hung around the entrance to Devil's Canyon. To some extent the entrances of the place were known to him, and he aimed to follow the winding route which he believed would lead him back to the trail over which he had just come. By so doing he hoped to be able to find the man upon whose track some of the Comanches had been temporarily detached. With him he fancied he could succeed in escaping from this dangerous region. Alone, unarmed and for the time utterly discouraged, he had no desire to continue the search which presented itself to his mind as an indistinct dream.

Up the long acclivity Davis pursued his way for some distance, until he was suddenly startled by hearing the noise of footsteps. Not knowing what might be before him he halted and listened. As a result he heard Hart Hazel's brief struggle when attacked by the outlaws, and the sounds of the footsteps of the men who bore him away.

Here was a quandary for Davis. To remain stationary was to run the risk of being overhauled by the Comanches, who he was certain would soon be in pursuit. To go back he dared not; and he realized what would be his fate if he went forward. As the best thing possible under the circumstances, however, he did nothing.

After a tiresome spell of waiting, Davis heard faintly a single revolver-shot, followed soon after by shouts. Then some one dashed swiftly past him with a light and almost noiseless step. He thought that this must be the person lately captured, and that probably his best plan would be to follow on behind and see if he could not reach some place of greater safety.

With this end in view he followed over a rough, but practicable pathway, which led him directly toward the Comanches.

Before Davis had gone very far, he became satisfied that the person he was trailing was a woman. Although it was too dark to catch more than the faintest outline of her form, he knew it by her gait, and the fall of her foot.

A thousand strange fancies leaped to his brain immediately. He redoubled his caution and kept noiselessly on her trail.

By and by they began to descend; the neck had been traversed and they were approaching the plain once more.

Without a sign of warning the woman suddenly and silently fell to the ground. She leaped quickly to her feet again; and was confronted

by a form, dark and forbidding, which started into sight. It was Pierre Roscaro.

Davis at the first was not close enough to witness the effect produced upon both by the meeting, or to hear the first words of recognition; yet he paused not, but continued to worm his way forward in silence. In this girl he had felt upon the instant an intense interest.

It was well that he did exercise all the caution of which he was master, since, on gaining a nearer position, his restlessly roving eyes pierced the darkness sufficiently to make out three other forms, which belonged to the three present companions of Pierre Roscaro.

"We meet at last, do we?" Roscaro was saying, when Davis first was able to distinguish what was being said. The man spoke in a low, guarded tone, but full of bitter intensity.

"My eyes have not deceived me," responded the girl. "You are that despicable villain, Pierre Roscaro. Now that we have met, now that you have found me, what have you to say? What other, deeper, more damning villainy was left for you to do?"

"Harsh, bold words those to use, if I am such as you state. Drop your tone a little, my dear girl, and be less boastful, too. You are here alone and powerless in my hands, and your death would serve me about as well as your life."

"You are an utter and complete coward! So you threaten me, do you? What care I for you or the other cut-throats I see lurking in the background? You murdered my father, and destroyed my poor mother, attempted also to murder my brother and me. Driven out like a pack of wolves into the lonely waste of this desolate region, by fear of you, Pierre Roscaro, you now come to see what further woe and wrong you can work?"

"Girl!" exclaimed Roscaro, hoarsely, clutching at her wrist—"Girl, I loved your mother, my cousin though she was. I might have even loved you, now that you have grown to womanhood, accursed daughter of that intruding American soldier, had you been content to have not fled from me. Who has mourned more over your mother's death, loving her as I did, than I? Could I tell that the execution of righteous judgment upon a foreign spy and traitor as your father was, would so turn your mother's mind as to cause her death?"

"Fine words these; but of little moment to one who knows so thoroughly as I your heartless, loveless nature. Between you and me there can be nothing but a lasting hate, and I know that your presence here is but to work more woe, more desolation, more murder upon me and mine, for with us out of the way you hope to secure our riches. I know you, Pierre Roscaro."

"For once you wrong me. I come on an errand of justice. I have news for you, and it was for your benefit that I first sent a scout into this region to look for you; and then, he failing me, came myself."

"You can bear no intelligence to me that I will accept. Your hands are red with human blood, and they would stain a message from Heaven in the bringing. Your errand of justice and you perish together."

"Nay, wait! Let me but explain. There are vast estates to gain, and as your guardian, for I am your nearest of kin, I would put you in possession, save a little profit in it to me perhaps. They came by your mother's side, wealth untold that she dreamed not of, and I would—"

"Hold! The name of my mother should be sacred from pollution by your lips. You, the assassin, who under the form of the law, denounced and murdered my father, shall not so profane his memory. We have met by chance, and suddenly—I hope we may never meet again. We fled to this wilderness to hide from you, and lest I should, with these hands of mine, avenge those most dear to me. Twice, when we would have sought the confines of civilization, you drove me out by an attempt to murder my mother and myself."

"I swear to you that is false!"

"False! Would I tell you a lie? Now mark me! If in the past there has been war between you and yours, and me and mine, henceforth that war shall be to the knife. Should we meet again, beware, for I will strive to lay you dead at my feet."

"War to the knife! Well, so be it. I have wavered in my plans; I have thought at one time to tame your proud spirit, girl—at another to press the right of my guardianship over you. In either case I make my own fortune. If we meet again? Nay, meet again, in this world, we never shall. I shall leave you here. By the soul of your dead mother—"

"Call not upon my dead mother. Though she be dead to you and to the world, she yet lives, a shattered, mind-wrecked woman. Even now I hasten to her, by a difficult path, to save her from the hands of the wild outlaws who have ventured within the hitherto shunned confines of these gloomy canyons."

"Is this truth that you are telling me?" asked Roscaro, in an altered tone.

"I have never yet learned to speak aught else than the truth," replied the girl in a proud tone. "Now stand aside and let me pass. Take heed to my warning, and beware of our next Pierre Roscaro meeting."

"It is false, your mother does not live! It is an invention of your own to save your worthless self. You shall—"

Roscaro did not complete the sentence, but he advanced toward the girl, who had fallen back a few steps, and there was danger in the hand so menacingly raised. She knew it; and she half-guessed that were it not for the presence, in the neighborhood, of the Comanche Indians, who had already given chase to her, and possibly to Roscaro, he would have attempted her life with the revolver so conveniently at his hand.

Meantime Davis, who heard this conversation, lay like one stunned, with scarce power of motion. Had he been possessed of a weapon he would have gone to her aid against the four. As it was he allowed Roscaro and the girl had the field to themselves, and until his support moved he patiently bided his time. Once or twice he half-raised himself with the intent of flying at the throat of the cool and deperate villain before him; but as often, something he knew not what restrained him.

A crisis had arrived and Davis nerved himself to meet it. The girl was to be saved at all risks—and the girl was saved!

Past Davis there darted a dark form, which plunged over the uneven ground at a marvelous rate, until it halted by the side of Florence. It was her well-trained mustang! As Starlight darted between herself and her foe, Florence threw herself upon his back, and urged him to full speed.

In a moment the girl was out of reach of present danger, and Roscaro was left impotently shaking a clinched fist at the vanishing steed and rider, for fear for himself prevented his firing his pistol, which would bring the Comanches down upon him.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THREE OUTLAWS LESS.

FLORENCE almost instantly disappeared from the astonished Roscaro and his companions. Pursuit was out of the question since she seemed to be dashing straight into the arms of the Comanches who were somewhere beyond.

Seeing this Davis checked the reckless, forward plunge that he was about to make, and, instead, while every eye was following the wild huntress, sought safety in at least a partial retracement of his steps.

Whither he should now go remained a mooted question. He found that there was more work before him than a simple escape from his late captors, and he stilled every thought of it, so far at least as he could, until he might place himself in some spot of temporary safety, where he might fairly grapple with the strange, wild tale he had heard outlined in the brief interview.

Bitterly he cursed the fate which left him unarmed just at that very moment when, had he seen a single glimmering hope of success, he would have hurled himself upon the villain so near him, even though it would have been to meet such fearful odds. It was only through most heart-racking experiences that he had gained the superb self-control, which enabled him thus to turn away in one direction while the Hermit-Huntress of Devil's Canyon vanished in another.

He questioned within himself whether it would be feasible to return to Hailstorm, who, of the Comanches, had seemed to bear toward him something of a friendly, trusting feeling. Perhaps, he thought, he might impart the information which he had just gained, and strike a bargain for the endangered ones by leading the Indian forces in an attack upon the outlaws. Whatever was to be done, however, was to be done quickly.

Through the darkness, then, with his heart beating loudly, his breath coming quick and fast, Burt Davis crept cautiously, with an idea of retracing his steps to the spot where he dropped from the Indian ranches and then pushing forward in silence and care until he rejoined them.

Without much warning he suddenly came upon a little scene that caused him to halt and take an observation before venturing further. Just a little beyond him, and in the opening, two men stood bending over a dark object which lay at their feet. They felt it, they turned it over with a touch rather gentle than otherwise, and then looked from it to each other, and simultaneously seated themselves upon the ground, in a way to be as free as possible from observation. A roll in the ground, slight though it was, thus obscured them from sight from the plains beyond.

The whispers of the two men were low, but their distinct hissing sound for that very reason came quite plainly to the ears of the listener.

"It is Bill, sure enough," said the one as he felt along the breast of the corpse, into which the shapeless mass now resolved itself.

"Bill, an' with his hull head stove in. What the red-hot blazes d'yer think c'd 'a' did it?"

"It's an crful mash. Pah! What's to be did with him?"

"Looks ez tho' he'd been kicked by fourteen thousand million mules all in one spot. Hev to leave him here an' take his place until the captain sends some one down. Durned if I like this yere section, er this yere work. Durned fools

we was to meddle with the Comanche; they're arter us a-b'ilin'."

"Why didn't they foller us straight in a stead o' flankin' 'round this yere way? That's what I'd like to know."

"'Cos they'd some one to lead 'em as know'd the all-fired crooks an' bends o' these kenyns a dog-goned sight better than we did. They mout 'a' swept in through here, too—no one a-guardin' till that youngster war gobbled."

"An' why didn't they come in?"

"'Cos there's a better way yet, I s'pose."

"Cavalry druv us from the North, Comanche from the South, an' here we've took ground at the Devil's Kenyon. I wish ter th' Lord I's back in old Texas. I don't like it yere nohow. I've heard on it, an' it tain't healthy. Whar d'yer s'pose is them scouts as war sent down to look 'round here?"

"Don't croak. Bill, yere's, dead, an' we can't do nothin' fur him—it's time we was lookin' 'round ag'in."

The two raised themselves up and peered out over the roll, across the plain.

"'Pears to me I see somethin' else out there. Take a squint."

The other gave a look also.

"It's jist lined 'ith corpses 'round yere. Let me take a cluster squint to him, an' you keep him kivered with yer rifle."

The man moved away upon his errand, and in a moment called back:

"Come yere, Mike, it's thet feller ther chief called a spy ez sure ez guns!"

"That devil of a hoss he left on hez shook him off and killed him fu'st, an' then Bill."

Hardly had the man addressed as Mike disappeared when Burt Davis was upon the spot vacated. At any other time to rob the dead would have been repugnant to his feelings, but now, impelled by duty and affection, he did not hesitate a moment. In a twinkling he had possessed himself of the arms, which still lay by the side of the fallen desperado. Then he in turn looked over the swell of ground to see what was going on.

The two men stood surveying this second body in wonder. They turned it and twitched it; one even spurned it with his foot.

What was Davis's surprise to see this supposed corpse suddenly become animated and endowed with life. With a bound the man, believed to be dead, was up and upon the other two. One brief second for a breathing-spell, then, from the nape of his neck there suddenly flashed up a bowie-knife, which as suddenly fell twice with sweeping, killing strength upon the two outlaws, who dropped, without any more articulate sound than a brace of low moans.

The victor paused to give two more cruel thrusts with his knife, then he hastened, with knife in one hand and a revolver in the other, directly toward the position occupied by Burt Davis.

CHAPTER XLVII.

USING THE COMANCHES.

THE eyes of Burt Davis were keen and quick. In the dim light, despite the hurried nature of his observation, he recognized something familiar about this man, who had done to death the two outlaws. Unless he was most wonderfully mistaken it was Hart Hazel.

Firm in this belief when the person was in a few yards of him he whispered sharply:

"Hazel, Hart Hazel!"

Upon the instant Hazel, for he it was, halted and in the same tone of voice responded:

"Here! who calls Hart Hazel?"

"Thank heaven that we are met once more—I am Burt Davis!"

As he said this Davis rose to his feet and, with extended hand, came across the short intervening space.

The meeting of these two friends was none the less genuinely hearty because of the surrounding circumstances. In a moment brief explanations had been made, and Davis had reassured his acknowledged supremacy over the young man. He drew Hazel to one side while he could hurriedly detail the only plan of procedure which he thought to adopt. When he had done so, Hazel held out his hand.

Then he said:

"We are with each other in this, and together we will see it to an end. These Comanches left me for dead. In fact I was resurrected from the grave to which their hands sent me. Yet if you say it is our only hope I shall submit to your leadership and tempt the risk."

"It is indeed our only chance. I have seen the woman of your dream, and she is more to me than to you, Hart Hazel. From her lips I have heard of a more singular resurrection than yours, even. I know that band of outlaws who have invaded these precincts. I know them well. They are under the leadership of one Hark Kenton who would not have come here except for some good reason. They are a terror to the Texan and Mexican borders and a blot on humanity. I will join hands even with Comanches to exterminate them, though I have always liked their chief, and pity him; but he should not do as he does."

"And then, if the Comanches exterminate us?"

"Fear not for that. The Hermit Huntress of Devil's Canyon is known to these Indians, you may be sure. They pursued her but a short time ago, yet it was through a mistaken idea that she was now in colleague with the men of Kenton. A word from me can set that right. And more, I know now, though no reference to it has passed between us, that I have a claim upon Hailstorm, the Comanche, for services rendered in the past, which he had not forgotten."

"Come on, then, though first let me disguise my appearance some little. I suspect that in the fight with the Comanches I did more than slight damage to some of their warriors, and it would be as well not to be recognized at first glance."

With some repugnance Hazel approached the body of the nearest outlaw and took from it the hat and blouse. By a few dexterous touches he altered, to a great extent, his outward appearance. He looked like an honest man at a masquerade.

All this took but a short time. When he was ready Davis led the way, and they slunk out from the jaw of the canyon, just as he heard the footsteps of half a dozen men coming down the pass behind them.

It was high time that they were moving since there was no doubt but that the discovery of the three corpses would create more than a passing ripple of excitement in the minds of Hark Kenton and his men.

The two pushed out beyond the precincts of the pass for perhaps half a mile, bearing all the time steadily to the left, though there were so many armed men in the neighborhood, a remarkable stillness brooded along the mountain range. Not a sound broke the silence, which was oppressive in its completeness.

The two men made haste slowly. When they had obtained a fair start they indeed accelerated their speed; yet they strode onward with the greatest care, lest they might be heard by those behind them, or their approach be discovered too soon by the Comanches.

In this utter quiet, there suddenly drifted down to them, from far above among the mountain fastnesses, which Hazel had trod but a few short hours before, a wild shriek. Deadened somewhat by distance, it nevertheless was wafted to their ears with a clearness that left little for the imagination to suggest. It came from a woman in deadly fear or peril.

Simultaneously the two halted to listen.

"Hark! can you stand that?" exclaimed Hazel.

With a groan Davis responded:

"I hear it, and it maddens me; but I know the only course which will be of any avail. We must hasten to find Hailstorm. He and his braves are waiting to be led into those fastnesses, and with them we may accomplish much—either to save or to avenge. Without them our lives would be wasted. Hark Kenton is on his guard. Put your best foot foremost; let there be no holding back."

"Let the white man wait! Hailstorm the Comanche is here!"

From the ground, almost at their feet, there rose up the tall, commanding figure of the Indian, who had been lying concealed. His sudden appearance sent a shiver through the shoulders of both white men, since they knew that had he so chosen, or had he been true to the ordinary interests of the red-man, he might have sent a feathered arrow into the hearts of both, as they stood there all unguarded.

"Good! Let Hailstorm listen, and run. It is time that we were moving, and I have learned much of the outlaws you would be avenged upon."

"And who is this that you have brought back with you? Are all the white men friends to the Comanches, that they come to their camps at midnight?"

The Indian eyed Hazel suspiciously, and evidently was upon his guard.

"It is an honest white man, who has just made his escape from the band of Hark Kenton. I can back his being a friend of ours and a foe of theirs. Are your braves ready for an attack now upon the robbers? We can lead you to their camp. We will aid you in the fight. We, too, have suffered; and we, too, must be avenged!"

"The Comanches are not asleep—they wait for the return of their chief, and the white brother who has been wandering. Come now, and when the word is given, they will move," said the chief, and he beckoned to Burt Davis and Hart Hazel to go with him.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

WAR IN THE HILLS.

AS Florence, the Hermit Huntress of Devil's Canyon, passed from sight, mounted upon her fleet mustang, Sonora Sam and the others came up to Roscaro. Matt Horne did not wait to be spoken to, but immediately shook his fist warningly at the Mexican.

"You heerd what she said, now the rest of yer biz must be with Kenton hisself. We're his men and in his pay, and war sent to scout down hyar while he went on. I dunno that he wants ary thing more o' this gal than to git her out o'

some trouble, an' so we was willin' to assist. Now he's hyar, ef you've ary barg'ins to make he's the man to make 'em with. Make up yer mind quick, too; you've trusted us, an' we'll trust you so fur. Either come in an' see Hark Kenton hisself, er git outer this afore mornin'."

"Blame yer fur a fool, too, thet don't know his own mind! Ef yer wanted her removed, why didn't yer do it? D'ye think we'd chip in till we saw ye ante?"

Roscaro answered Sonora Sam first. He turned to him with some anger, and responded:

"I find that Kenton has dealt doubly with me, for he has let me take some of his men, and then has come here with the rest of his band; but the girl who cowed men like Delain and Meyers might well hold the drop on me, when I dared not shoot for fear of the red devils down there. Couldn't you see that she had me marked down from the moment that we met?"

Then turning to Matt, he continued:

"So you two are of Hark Kenton's band? Well, and why did you not tell me that before? We know each other—have met on the cattle drives across the border. If you can thread your way into his lines, lead on, for my resolution is taken now, at last; and then you did not hear her? There are others near besides this girl, and they must be looked after, for I suppose Kenton must now know all."

"They'll be looked after, never fear," answered Horne, with a malevolent sneer.

"But I must see it done. I have been deceived by those into whose hands I intrusted her before; I shall see to it that I am not again."

"We kin lead yer in—it's only that thar's so many trails that we're troubled. More kenyns than Comanches, all on 'em leadin' together, 'ceptin' those that leads nowhar."

Caballos was as imperturbable as ever, and he said nothing. His cold, black eyes were hidden by the darkness around, and when they were not to be seen the man might as well be dead for all the expression of opinion that he gave utterance to. And even those eyes seldom told tales. Why or how he had attached this man to himself during the past dozen years, was a mystery to Roscaro; but he had never cared to ask himself on the subject. When questioned Jose Caballos could give shrewd answers and suggestions; he seemed in many respects a willing tool, shaped by some strange force of circumstances out of finer material than one would expect to find in the composition of such a man. When Roscaro came, Caballos came; where Roscaro went Caballos went.

In this case no one asked for his opinion, and as Roscaro went up, in company with Sonora Sam and Matt Horne, to the inter-mountain recesses to find Black Larry, and where Hark Kenton had taken up, at sundown that evening, his quarters, Caballos, as usual, following him.

Sonora Sam, from what Florence of the Canyon had said, opined that the pass which he had refused to follow a while before, led to the spot where the outlaws were now camped. He led the way then for a short distance over the very track taken but a short time before by Davis. He deflected to the right, however, and met the pickets, who were descending in force, and by them, after some little explanation, was directed whither to go.

Hark Kenton, leader of outlaws though he was, had not the most inhuman appearance of all human beings in the world. He was rather soft of voice than otherwise, and his countenance scarcely would have revealed that he had been guilty of all crimes from cattle-stealing to throat-cutting. Though he was indignant at Sonora Sam and his ally for their tardy appearance, he received Roscaro and Caballos with as much warmth as could reasonably be expected under the circumstances. There were probably fifteen or twenty men encamped around him. The rest were detailed on the various duties which needed attention.

Sonora Sam made a report, which mollified the mind of his captain somewhat. He brought news to Hark Kenton which was indeed most important.

Then Pierre Roscaro spoke, and he began to upbraid Kenton for following into those wilds. While he was speaking there came to the ears of all the same shriek which had been heard by Hazel and Davis, and so startled them.

After a moment of silence:

"My men are finding out some of the infernal mysteries of these canyons," said Kenton, coolly. "I had thought to make a safe retreat here when I sent those two lazy whelps to spy out the recesses of these hills. Now we will have to make a stand, since the Comanches are coming so true and so hard on our trail. Curse them, I thought they were thrown off the trail; it must be that they have stumbled upon it by luck."

"Or have been led to it by the white man whom we saw with them," suggested Roscaro.

"Yes—but listen. Something not right is going on beyond there. My men have met with a check, that is certain."

There came from the point indicated the sound of cries, shots, and a strange, indescribable chorus of noises. Then a man was seen dashing down a rough, narrow, almost precipitous pathway, which might have been a dried-up water-course.

"Here! a dozen of you men! There must be danger—follow me!"

With this exclamation, Hark Kenton rushed up the pathway without stopping to hear the report of the demoralized outlaw; and close upon his heels followed Roscaro and the rest. They climbed, they scrambled, when they could they ran, and soon the little park, on the side of which lay the cabin of Florence of Devil's Canyon, lay before them, brightly illuminated by the rays of the moon, which was shining with great brilliancy.

CHAPTER XLIX.

SAVED.

ALONG the outer rim of clear ground, and to the right, a man crawled on his hands and knees, with progress that was painfully slow.

The outlaws, under the lead of Kenton ran to meet him, and as they drew near, they perceived that the feathered end of an arrow was sticking from between his shoulders. Beyond, still further, they heard a sickening, tearing sound, or succession of sounds, but by what caused could not at once be told, since they came from the darkness which lay in a complete band around the side of the hill.

"What is this, you cursed coward?" shouted Kenton, as he approached the man. "What is the danger? Where does it lie?"

The man gurgled out his response in horrified accents:

"The devils! The wolves! They shoot! they tear! they scream! They have killed me!"

As he spoke, the man looked fearfully over his shoulder in the direction of the sounds—then dropped prone upon the ground, fainting, if not dead.

Kenton pressed on without pausing. Just as, revolver in hand, he entered the shadow, three immense wolves disengaged themselves from the dark ball in which they had been entwined, and leaped away, being lost to sight almost as soon as seen. They left a mangled corpse behind them, and it too, had a long arrow driven through and through the body.

From the opposite side of the hollow another of the outlaws came dashing up. He had heard the noise of a conflict, seen Kenton and his men enter the park, and came to report what he had discovered, and to see what could be seen. With his appearance there were still two men to be accounted for; doubtless their lifeless forms would be found further up the hillside.

While the man approached he waved his hand wildly and shouted:

"Forward! quick! There is a fuss beyond; I heard horsemen coming! Quick, to hold it!"

With the exception of scouts and sentinels Hark Kenton's whole band was grouped together around their leader, who now did not hesitate to take the advice given him, and as all sprung forward, they caught sight, for a moment, of two dark forms, of a woman and a boy, who flitted from one neck of shadow to another. Beyond there sounded, clear and full, the ring of hoofs, telling of the approach of some reckless rider.

Half a dozen rifle and pistol shots rattled harmlessly around the fugitives and they passed from sight unharmed. Then still further on a single mounted person came into view. It was Florence of Devil's Canyon. Running to meet her were the two fugitives, the woman and the boy.

With a word and a motion Florence checked the speed of her horse, which turned as though mounted on a pivot; the two fugitives at the same time again darting into sight. They ran up alongside of Florence, who sprung lightly to the ground.

"Tis she," hoarsely whispered Roscaro to the outlaw chief. "Five hundred doubloons if you kill them or bring them down!"

"Hold!" exclaimed Kenton, as he saw his men raise their rifles.

His command came too late, for a rattling volley followed the order; but under the fire the men saw the woman mount the horse lately vacated by the girl, and dash away. The girl and boy on foot followed, and in a moment more were lost to sight. As they disappeared the long, lugubrious howl of three wolves was heard from in front, while behind and above clattered the hoof-beats of several mounted outlaws, who had taken the upper trail on hearing the noise of the shots.

All these events passed rapidly as the changes of a dream. The action of the tragedy never ceased for an instant, but surged along in a torrent of seemingly natural circumstances. It would have taken a nimble writer to keep a chronicle in pace with the events as they occurred there in that wild canyon.

Without hesitation Kenton and his men bounded along on the trail of the fugitives. In scarcely an appreciable portion of time there suddenly yawned before them the jaws of a narrow pass, which led into the heart of the solid mountain, and at the same time there rung out a clear, commanding girlish voice, which thrilled every heart, and perhaps brought a flush of shame to a few of the faces in the surging crowd of desperate, armed men.

"Halt! Hold there!—stand!"

The sound came from above, and every eye

was at once turned in that direction, while nearly every one paused at the sudden command. The foremost of those that did not heed received an arrow in his shoulder, which came from the opposite side of the pass.

"I am well protected and I hold six lives in my hand. Wait ten minutes and we will retire; come on now and it is at your peril," came the ringing words from the canyon.

Kenton detached two men to the right and two men to the left, then glanced at the situation.

The moonlight streamed straight and full upon the outlaws, but the girl was invisible; she was lurking somewhere among the rocks above, which commanded the entrance to the narrow pass. He knew that doubtless some one was hidden upon the other side of the canyon, and he heard the strokes of the fleeing steed echo fainter and fainter beyond.

The check was of but brief duration. The command of the entrance was to be won, the girl and her companions taken, and the Comanches to be guarded against.

With a yell of defiance the outlaws dashed on, and loud rung the order of their chief:

"He who harms that girl or boy, dies by my hand!"

Florence redeemed her threat. Under that rushing attack she never flinched. As the assailants came nearer and entered the range of certainty, with deadly sureness she opened upon the advancing bandits.

Crack after crack her revolver rolled out leaden harm. With marvelous quickness it was raised and dropped in her hand, and with each fall of the wrist the hammer fell, under the steady pull upon the trigger of her nervous second finger, and the report followed—and in the midst of the shouts and shots Hart Hazel came rushing through and to the edge of the pass, outrunning the Comanches, under the spur of the battle-sounds ahead of him. But there were others close behind him, Burt Davis and Hart.

Hazel came to the end of the pass just as the last load went from the revolver of the girl. Despite the yells and shots and turmoil before him, that last shot fell upon Hart Hazel's ear with telling distinctness, and as though by magic he comprehended the situation. Away above him, ensconced in a niche in the rocks which protected in front, behind, and upon the left, he saw an indistinct and shadowy form. It was Florence, crouching, while with the rapidity of lightning she recharged her smoking weapon.

Hazel's glance went a yard or two higher up. There, leaning over the edge of the rocks, fully and boldly relieved in the streaming moonlight, Matt Horne was in the act of drawing a pistol down upon the girl beneath. What that action boded Hazel knew full well. With a crash the words heard in his dream, rung through his ears:

"Haste, haste! Save her, save her!"

From his belt to a deadly aim his revolver flashed up, and as Horne's weapon, almost as rapidly pointed, hovered on the eve of settlement upon the head of Florence, Hazel's bullet went deep into the outlaw's brain. The stricken man on the instant spread wide his arms, then dropped from his perch, striking heavily against the girl below. She, toppling over, fell downward—and into the outspread arms of Hart Hazel, who had sprung forward ready to receive her.

CHAPTER L.

A DEATH SCENE.

THE strength and dexterity of Hart Hazel broke the force of what might otherwise have been a fatal fall to the girl. All unnerved as she was by the suddenness of the event, Florence lay limply within his arms and suffered him to carry her closer to the overhanging rocks.

The shot and fall were observed by the outlaws, who set up a shout—and the answering walls of the pass sent back a wild and terrific response. Upon the instant the band of Comanches charged out, with Burt Davis and Hailstorm at their head.

It could not be called a surprise, yet the result was a fatal rout of the outlaws. At the very first shock, when perhaps a vigorous stand might have enabled them to prevent the Indians deploying from the contracted defile, Kenton's men broke away in sudden panic. Without pausing to see the size of the attacking force they turned dismayed and set their faces toward the spot where, through the precipitous pathway, they had entered the wild park.

In the meshes of this network of retreating outlaws a youth was entangled, who had no business to be there.

When Florence fell, her brother, from the position where he had been dealing out with ready bow and arrow noiseless death-shots, saw it and not understanding the cause leaped nimbly down the rocks before him—and into the hands of two men, who swung him into the crowd, which then retreating bore him away.

The mounted men and the men on foot left the bloody precincts by the separate routes over which they had entered. Hark Kenton and the men with him, however much they stormed and blasphemed, thought of no way of escape but flight, and they sought to regain as quickly as

possible the horses they had left in the lower canyons.

As he ran the outlaw leader was angry with himself for being embroiled in the fatal fight, in which he had been caught at disadvantage by the Comanches!

He had discovered that Roscaro was coming there to play some deep game, and he guessed against whom, and so he had come too with his band. Then too he had met and loved an Indian girl, a Comanche, and he had hoped to see her and bear her away as his wife.

He remembered the captive girl now and wished that he had never seen her, that he had paused before he crossed the path of the affections of Hailstorm the Comanche chief. Had he done so the Indian sleuth-hounds would not have been upon his track, he would not have been driven to bay within these mountain recesses, and but for the presence of the Comanches he might have played the game against Roscaro in a way that would have been pleasing to himself. Florence of Devil's Canyon he had meant to save from Roscaro, but the intriguing Mexican had with promises of gold, demoralized his men and gotten them out of his control. Bitterly he regretted coming.

Too late these thoughts now, when his men were falling by his side. Too late as he burst from the path into the glade in which he had but a few hours ago made his camp. He sprung toward the line of horses which were picketed with military precision, and was about to bound into the saddle when the men, with Roscaro and Caballos, came swarming along the line of horses, and all was hot eagerness to be away in flight. The panic was not yet allayed; they made no useless effort to stop Hart Hazel and Florence the huntress, who led the Indians as they came swarming down the valley. The radiant moonlight still made them a ready mark; the dark shades still concealed the assailants.

There was mounting in hot haste and a headlong flight; but the sense of security gained by being once more in the saddle was beginning to have a tranquilizing effect, when suddenly fire was opened upon them from in front, at the same time that Hart Hazel and the rest opened from the rear. To complete their demoralization, they perceived that they had neglected to take the sharp curve to the left, and had rushed headlong into a *cul-de-sac* which was surrounded, save at the point of entrance, by walls impassable by horsemen.

The outlaws wheeled and charged backward to force their way out. With fees behind them it would not do to attempt to hold the otherwise defensible position.

It was now a race for the turn in the pass—a race in which neither party won. The Comanches and the outlaws came together with a mighty clash of battle which dropped more than one rider or horse on either side.

Of the unhorsed, Sonora Sam was one, and as he struck the ground, Roscaro, mounted and unharmed, passed over him, and dashed through the opposing ranks, with Caballos by his side, the latter as cool and imperturbable as ever, apparently only riding to save his life and keep pace with his friend, since his weapons remained undrawn at his belt.

Instantly Sonora Sam was upon his feet, his hand still retaining the ready revolver. He aimed it at the nearest of the advancing foes, and pulled the trigger.

The line was now not many paces distant, but the bullet missed its destined mark. At the same moment a horseman near by fired. It was Kenton the Outlaw. At the sound of the shot, Roscaro threw up his arms and pitched heavily from his horse.

With statue-like coolness Caballos halted, dismounted and bore the wounded man from under the very hoofs of the now intermixed combatants.

The tide of combat rolled away. The two captives of the outlaws were safe in the hands of their respective friends, and the remnant of the band pushed, cut, fought, and finally thrust their way through, gained the pass, and fled far away from the scene.

Caballos remained alone with Roscaro, who was dying, killed by Kenton, who, moved by some strange impulse when he saw him escaping, had leveled his pistol and fired.

"This is the end," said Roscaro faintly, as he looked up into the face of his companion.

"I am afraid it is," responded Caballos slowly, and with a solemn emphasis.

"Yes, the dreams of immense wealth that have been mocking me are fading away. For a score of years I have followed the phantom that seemed so near and yet so far, and here it all ends.

"I sought to win wealth through my cousin, and failing, I have sought to be avenged upon her, and upon her children; but here it now ends. Fate has always stepped in at the last moment."

"Fate or something else," interposed the other, with a peculiar intonation.

Roscaro raised himself upon his elbow with a painful effort, and looked into the eyes of his friend suspiciously.

"What else?" he said.

"The Church."

"The Church?"

"Yes, the Church, which held and holds an interest in those immense estates which now will never be yours. When the American came and married your cousin, it saw that perhaps, in case of her death without issue, it would go to the Church."

"It watched the maneuvers which killed the American through your acts of treachery, and which drove the mother, daughter and son out of Mexico. Through all your reckless windings you were tracked. You were plunging into the hands of the Church, and as it could not check you, it let you play your own game with its eye upon you, determined that you should never rob the woman, Isabel Varona that was, and her children of their rights."

"Curses! I believe you tell the truth. I saw it, and I made this last move to provide against it. I thought the mother was dead, and that in this Hermit girl and her brother, I had the heirs, and I could use them for my ends, or kill them and thus claim the estate."

"Yet they all live. The man is dead who was holding between you and them, and fortune; but the heirs are here, ready now to step into possession. The little estate which you succeeded in plundering Davis of, is but a drop in the bucket. I fancy the business of the Church and her agents in this direction is at an end, for those to whom the wealth belongs will now claim their own, and no longer have cause for fear."

"And the agents—who were they? Agents of the Church?"

"I am one. *I am a priest*," was the calm reply of Caballos.

"And in the years in which I have known you as a friend and ally, you were the paid tool and spy—"

"Tool, perhaps, and spy—but not paid. Who so poor as I? My work has been given freely. At the end I should have unmasked a wicked villain. I shall never go again whither I am sent—in life or death *I shall never see you any more*."

Never any more. The painful solemnity of words and tone struck heavily upon Roscaro, who now lay almost motionless upon the arm of Caballos, and whose voice was dwindling down to a thin whisper.

He closed his eyes and remained motionless. Caballos bent down over him and listened. There was just the softest flutter of breath through the open mouth; below, from his wounded chest, there came a bubbling sound; then a fleck of foam appeared upon his lips.

Pierre Roscaro had not, through life, seemed to those who knew him, so violently vicious; your thoroughly wicked man seldom does. Over the usually impassive face of Caballos there stole a look of pity. He put his hand upon the clammy brow of the villain, over whom for years he had been exercising surveillance, had been in fact shadowing him as a detective.

"Repent! Confess!"

The eyes opened—they were glazing fast.

"Oh!"

For a moment the gleam of an intense despair triumphed over the film of death. The words of remorse came as though dragged out from a superhuman power holding them back.

"*I—confess—all! I repent and ask forgiveness!*"

Caballos looked thoughtfully at the dying man; he caught the agonizing, yearning gleam in his eyes. Slowly he replaced his hand upon the dark brow.

"As a priest, I absolve you!"

One convulsive struggle, one clutch with outstretched arms, a gasping, gurgling groan and Pierre Roscaro was dead.

A shadow fell athwart the corpse at the moment and Caballos looked up.

Larry Delain and Hank Meyers stood before him, gazing down upon their late employer.

"What to do with the yaller-haired gal of Devil's Gulch won't trouble him no more. His checks is passed in. We'll pass out now—afore the Comanch' hez a chanct to show the'r gratoosd. Good-by! Our wages is paid."

The two turned as silently as they came and Caballos was again alone with the corpse.

CHAPTER LI.

THE OUTLAW'S STORY.

In the charge of the Comanches, and the flight of the outlaws, Hart Hazel pressed on with great vigor, and close by his side, had Florence of Devil's Canyon been the while.

Suddenly they found themselves separated from the others, and out before them with his hands raised above his head, in token of surrender, had stepped a tall form.

Instantly it was covered with revolvers held by Hart Hazel and the Hermit Huntress.

"My hands are up! Is it not proof that I mean you no harm?"

"You are the chief of the outlaws?" said the girl.

"Yes, I am Kenton the outlaw in Texas, Don Cantrella the bandit in Mexico."

"I have seen you before."

"Yes, to night, and I sought to save you from Pierre Roscaro."

"A strange method it was that you took to

befriend me—attacking me with your cut-throats."

"But I have heard my mother speak of you in the past."

"Then you should know that I was your friend, for I was hers in the long ago, yes, until now, and until death her friend, and yours."

"And with such professions of friendship you come here with you cruel men at your back to hunt me down?"

"Let me tell you two reasons for my coming."

"Well."

"Let me go back to the past, and tell you that once I was a soldier of the American army, honored and respected."

"One I deemed my friend, was a spy, and to shield himself he sacrificed me."

"I was sentenced to be shot as a spy, was wounded by the fire and escaped."

"I would not go to join the foes of my country, but being cared for by outlaws joined them."

"While their chief I was able to befriend your mother and your father."

"I loved your mother with all my soul, girl; but she loved my former friend, Hugh Davis, and became his wife."

"Your father and mother were persecuted by Pierre Roscaro, who sought the wealth of the Varonas."

"A short while ago he came to me to get men for secret work."

"I gave him all he asked for, and was told by one that he was coming here."

"I knew that your mother, yourself and brother had fled from Mexico, and I believed you were hiding here, and suspected that you might be the Wild Huntress of Devil's Canyon, of whom so much was said along the border."

"I determined to also come, and I did so."

"I had another motive."

"When I was once wounded, Lallaree, a Comanche girl, saved my life, and she told me that her mother had been a white captive and she wished to leave the tribe."

"I loved the girl, and I hoped to steal her away from the Comanche village, which I knew was not far from Devil's Canyon."

"I got here to find that the Comanches were on the trail of Roscaro and his men."

"I joined Roscaro, or rather he came to me, for self-protection, finding I was here, and I sought to capture you, fearing you would escape, and I wished you to know all."

"I told my men I would kill the man who harmed you—"

"I heard you say that," said Florence.

"But, Roscaro's promise of gold made my men wild, and you know the result."

"When forced to fly I saw that Roscaro would escape."

"I care little for human life, and I determined to do one good act for you, to free you from that man, so that you could go back, with your mother and brother, to your home in Mexico, and enjoy the wealth that is your own."

"I therefore killed Pierre Roscaro."

"You killed him?" almost shouted the girl.

"Yes, he lies over yonder near that large tree, dying, and a man that I know to have once been a priest, but who, for some reason, has herded with Roscaro, is with him."

"Now you know all, and you can tell your mother, girl, who it was that took the life of Pierre Roscaro and avenged her noble husband."

"Tell her that I, an outlaw, have avenged her, and that from to-day I no longer sin, for I will go far away from here and devote my life to good deeds, to repair the evil I have done."

"God bless you, girl, and adios."

Without another word he turned away, and neither Hart Hazel or Florence said ought to detain him.

A self-confessed outlaw, they made no hostile demonstration against him, but saw him mount his horse and ride away in the moonlight.

From that day Kenton, the outlaw, was never heard of again along the border, and it is to be hoped that he kept his word in trying to repair the evil he had done.

CHAPTER LII.

THE HERMIT HUNTRESS.

ABOUT sunrise, Florence, of Devil's Canyon, mounted upon a fine mustang and accompanied by Hart Hazel, Davis, and the three wolves, dashed out through the grass, by which the Comanche had made their entrance, into the valley where the Huntress had lately had her abode. The girl's face now wore a singular appearance. The stern battle look had been swept away, and in its stead was one of satisfaction and yet of hope.

The wolves ran on in advance, with their noses down—they were trailing Starlight.

Before long the trail itself became visible, when the plain had been reached, and the little party followed it at a swinging gallop.

In an hour's time a number of miles had been flung behind, and Florence saw that the tracks headed straight for a motte which lay not far distant.

"Follow slowly while I ride on in advance. I think this is the limit of our chase, and there will be some preparation to make."

The girl dashed on ahead and was soon lost to sight among the timber. When the two men had come to within a short distance they halted and waited.

The sound of weeping fell upon their ears; after a few moments Florence appeared at the edge of the timber line and beckoned with her finger to Davis, who threw himself from his horse and ran forward to join her, Hazel remaining where he was, for the meeting about to take place was of too sacred a character for stranger eyes to witness.

To his surprise Florence soon reappeared and walked thoughtfully toward the young man.

"Mother is wholly herself once more, and wishes to be alone with him. Father's coming has caused her to regain her mind," said the girl simply, and leaned her elbow upon the back of Davis's horse.

Hart Hazel strove in vain against the temptation; his eyes would wander toward the young woman who stood so near to him. He scanned her countenance with furtive yet eager glances. What he saw was a girl of twenty, with a superb form, an eye of clear, deep blue, a wealth of flowing, golden hair, exquisitely cut features and a look brave, noble, womanly.

More to herself than to Hazel she finally uttered:

"If only poor Charlie could be here."

"We can soon be with him again and his wound is slight; it is not probable that it will disable him more than a day or two from exertion."

"I know; but it seems to me as though we should all be together now, if ever."

A desire for talking seemed to seize Florence, and she continued:

"Ours is a strange story, is it not?"

"I have heard some of it—can guess much of the rest; yet I cannot say that I fully understand it. Had your mother spoken of Burton Davis, I might have guessed something of it sooner. Your father was a reticent man; he told me but little of his past life."

"There is no mystery about it. It was only that he did not wish to bring up harrowing recollections. His name is Hugh Burton Davis. He was, as you know, an American officer, who remained in Mexico after the war, and wooed, won and married my mother, who had a small fortune of her own, and was heiress to large estates upon the death of her father. Pierre Roscaro was a cousin of my mother and a rival suitor. He brought down upon my father the hand of the suspicious Government of Mexico—as we thought with fatal force."

"My father was arrested, quickly tried, and thrown into prison, doomed to die."

"His escape, as he told me last night, was miraculous."

"A number of men were also doomed to die when he did."

"One prisoner, who was under life-sentence, was in the cell with my father, and told him he preferred death."

"He asked my father to let him take his place in the death line, and he did so, the change not being noticed in the darkness."

"He was shot and my father lived, and was that night sent to a different prison far away."

"No one knew the difference there, as he was unknown to the guards, and he was supposed to be the life-prisoner, and was put to work."

"It was years ere he made his escape."

"But at last he was able to do so, and feeling that in the change that had come over him he would not be known, he determined to venture home."

"When my father, in disguise, revisited our old home, he found the mansion deserted, and the estate, as he supposed, in the hands of the Government. Responses received to guarded inquiries caused him to believe that his wife, daughter and son had been slain, and so it was that he became what now he is, a Texan guide and hunter."

"But how came he to adopt this strange hermit life?"

"Roscaro, who discovered where my mother had fled from him, found me at a place where I was being educated, and made an attempt to get me in his power."

"At this my mother's shattered senses gave way; though I did not understand it then."

"She formed a mad scheme; she fled to this wilderness, bringing with us all that we needed."

"The Comanches became our friends, and here we have long lived."

"We have taken kindly to the adventurous life. How we trapped and hunted, how I gathered around me a few strange pets, who were a comfort and an aid—of these and many more things I need not tell you. But we are reunited at last."

"Now tell me, pray, how came you to visit our camp that night upon the desert, and why did you fly when I started from my slumbers?" asked Hart Hazel.

"Strangely enough. My mother—whose mind was only really unsettled when thinking of my father and our dangers—dreamed that her husband was returning—that he was lost upon the desert—that he lay dying by the side of that spring. She forced me to go out to reconnoiter, and knowing the place well I left her with my

brother, and carried by fleet Starlight reached the place.

"It was my mistake in plains-craft. Until the last moment a disbeliever, I then looked for but one, saw but one; and that one a stranger."

"You fled from that one, though?" said Hazel, reproachfully.

"Yes, for I had no time even for a breathing spell. Yet afterwards I think, perhaps, I made amends. I met with some adventures, I saw you coming, I had my trained scouts out to watch, I sent them for tidings—and from their actions I could learn much. Then at last they brought you to our house; and—you know the rest."

"And you have heard of my dream?"

Hazel looked at her quietly as he put this question.

"Yes," she answered, frankly, but with a smile.

"And how it brought us here across the desert and through the dangers."

"Blessed dream! It saved us all," she whispered softly.

"And do you know I still think—"

"What?"

"That—ah, I am bold, I am weak, I am wicked. Into your hour of rejoicing I thrust my dream."

"Again I say, blessed dream. Yet, what?"

"That you are the one—"

"No more, I know *what*. Perhaps since the night I saw you, for the first time at the spring in the desert, I have felt—"

"What?"

The question of Hart Hazel was coolly cruel. She looked up into his face and smiled.

"Hark! father comes; the murmur of their voices has ceased, and he would call us to them. Let us go!"

Hazel drew a step nearer and held out his hand.

"Will you take my hand?" he said.

Florence dropped her slender, brown little hand into the outstretched palm. With a courtly grace Hazel raised it to his lips.

"The one woman!" he slowly repeated.

"The one man," she responded. Then she hastily snatched her hand away and flew toward the motte.

With that pledge we leave them, for Hart Hazel had at last found the woman of his thought, the ideal of his heart.

He had left his old Tennessee homestead a skeptic about a woman's love, and in the wilderness he had found one that he idolized.

The strange stories that he had heard, of Hugh Davis the American soldier, Isabel Varona the Mexican beauty and heiress, of Roscaro and of Kenton, people of a generation before his own, flitted strangely through his mind.

Then came the thought of the present generation, of Florence Davis, even more beautiful than had been her mother, of himself, and how he had won the right to claim her as his own, and he was happy.

Around the little cabin they all sat that night, Hugh Davis, with his wife by his side and a happy smile upon her face, while the borderman also wore a look of joy, Charlie, the young son, Florence and Hart Hazel, and they talked over the happiness of two generations, while the parrot looked on and Death, Head, and Thigh-bones kept watch outside.

"I guess I won't turn the old Tennessee homestead into a Bachelor's Paradise, but we can all go there and make it our home, and we will take Starlight, the parrot and the wolves with us," said Hart Hazel.

The next day Hugh Davis and Hart Hazel buried the dead, and Pierre Roscaro found a grave near the home of those whom his persecution had driven to such a home in the wilderness.

As soon as possible the little party left the cabin in Devil's Canyon, and a month later the good people in the neighborhood of Hart Hazel's home were amazed to find that the wandering heir had returned, and not alone, for he brought his wife and her kindred with him; but he kept secret the story of how he had found her through Trailing A Dream.

THE END.

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